WHO's WHO

Books of Jacob | Slow read | Who's Who

The essential characters of the Books of Jacob

Jan 20, 2025

Welcome to the 2025 slow read of Olga Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob*.

In this post, I introduce you to fourteen main characters who you will meet on this “fantastic journey across seven borders, five major languages and three major religions, not counting the minor sects.”

There are more than 120 characters in the novel, and most are drawn from real historical personages. Those historical personages include Jacob Frank, after whom the novel is named. You will also glimpse French and Polish Kings, Empress Maria Therese of Austria, and key figures in European history from the 1640s to the French Revolution.

These characters are exceptionally vibrant, complex and realistic. Unlike many historical novels, Tokarczuk’s women characters are independent, rounded and compelling. Characterisation is one of Tokarczuk’s greatest gifts.

You will hear the real voices of these characters and historical personages. *The Books of Jacob* has many narrators and voices to keep track of. You will get to know Jacob primarily through the eyes of these other characters. Their fates intertwine. Their names change when they convert faiths, cross borders, and change their national or cultural identities.

A list of characters can help you keep track of the intriguing story. Here is my list of fourteen of the most compelling characters, all of whom we meet in Book One, “The Book of Fog”.

Subscribed

The list has no spoilers.

Jacob Frank

The central figure of the novel is a charismatic Jewish guru who claims to be the Messiah. Or is he really a psychopath? He leads a religious movement that blends elements of mystical Judaism, Christianity, and

Islam. He was born Yankiele Leybowicz, and adopted the name Jacob Frank as an adult, prophet and convert.

Yente

Yente is Jacob's grandmother, who at the start of the novel swallows a Kabbalistic amulet and becomes an omniscient narrator. She observes the events of the novel from a state between life and death. She links us to a longer history.

Hannah Frank (born Tovah)

Hannah (also known as Hanele) is the daughter of the spiritual leader, Yehuda Tova haLevi (Tovah). She grew up in Nikopol and was married to Jacob Frank as a teenager when her father saw promise in his movement.

Avacha or Eva Frank

Avacha or Eva is Hannah and Jacob's daughter, who becomes important in continuing his legacy after his death.

Pinkas ben Zelek

Pinkas of Kozowa, is an orthodox Jew who serves as the secretary to Rabbi Rappoport of Lwow.

Gitla Pinkasowna

Gitla was the daughter of Pinkas and sometime follower of Jacob. She takes the name, Gertruda Ascerbach, after becoming the companion of our next character, Asher Rubin.

Asher Rubin

Asher Rubin is a Jewish doctor who studied in Italy and lives, at the start of the novel, in Rohatyn. He is skeptical of Jacob's movement and

represents the early adoption of scientific approaches to medicine in Europe. He later moves to Lwow, where he meets Gitla.

Nahman Samuel ben Levi

Nahman is a follower of Jacob, and a student of a leading teacher of Kabbalistic traditions, the Besht. Nahman’s own chronicle of Jacob's life and teachings, ‘Scraps’, becomes a central thread of the book.

Elisha Shorr and the Shorr family

Elisha Shorr is the patriarch of a large Jewish family many of whom become involved in Jacob's movement. Many members of the Shorr family play a role in Jacob’s story, including Nathan, Isaac, Shlomo and Hayah, Elisha’s prophetess daughter.

Kajetan Soltyek

Soltyek is an ambitious bishop of the Polish Catholic Church who develops an ambivalent relationship with Jacob, Jews and the Frankist heresy. His career in the church and the fortunes of Poland, the Jews and the Frankists are intertwined.

Benedykt Chmielowski

Chmielowski is a priest, writer and Enlightenment scholar. He is a real historical figure who compiled Poland's first encyclopedia, *New Athens*. He sought to spread knowledge despite resistance from parts of Polish society. Stories of his book recur throughout the novel. He writes a series of letters and develops a Platonic friendship with the next character, Elżbieta Drużbacka.

Elżbieta Drużbacka

Elżbieta Drużbacka is poet, mother, governess and manager of the estate of a powerful Polish noble family. She maintains a writing life despite all

those roles, and through her correspondence with Chmielowski we discover her hidden connection to Jacob.

Katarzyna Kossakowska

Katarzyna Kossakowska is the noblewoman who Drużbacka serves. From the powerful noble Potocki family she married another noble, but did not conform to limited assumptions about the power of women. She becomes a leading politician in Poland before its Partition. Her wealth, social connections and commanding personality lead her to play a fateful role in Jacob's story.

Antoni Kossakowski (Moliwda)

Antoni Kossakowski is Katarzyna Kossakowska's cousin. We first meet him at the Orthodox monastery at Mount Athos where he uses an adopted name, (Moliwda). He is a Polish writer, official, wanderer, adventurer, and enigmatic character who acts, for a time, as the

ambassador and advocate for Jacob's movement. But nothing lasts forever.

In of the 32 weeks of the Slow Read, I will add some notes on these and other characters, both as presented in Tokarczuk's fiction and their known stories from history. For paid subscribers, I will also compile an index of characters for your reference during the slow read.

NOTES FOR READING POLISH ORTHOGRAPHY

One frustration readers may encounter is uncertainty about how to pronounce Polish names. Do not worry too much. It does not prevent you enjoying the novel, and I am still learning myself. But this basic guide will save you the minor embarrassments of my mispronunciations on YouTube.

- C is pronounced 'ts'
- W is pronounced 'v'

- J is pronounced ‘y’
- R is rolled, like in Spanish
- Ch is pronounced ‘h’
- Dz is similar in sound to ‘tz’
- Ć and cz are both pronounced ‘ch’
- Ś is pronounced ‘sh’
- Ź is pronounced ‘zh’ (as in ‘measure’)
- Dż is pronounced ‘g’ (as in ‘gel’)
- Ł is pronounced ‘w’ (as in ‘wool’)
- Ą is a nasal ‘o’ (as in ‘wrong’ or ‘on’)
- Ę is a short, sharp _e_ (as in ‘in’ or ‘bin’)

Next Monday, I will share the essentials on the historical context for the novel.

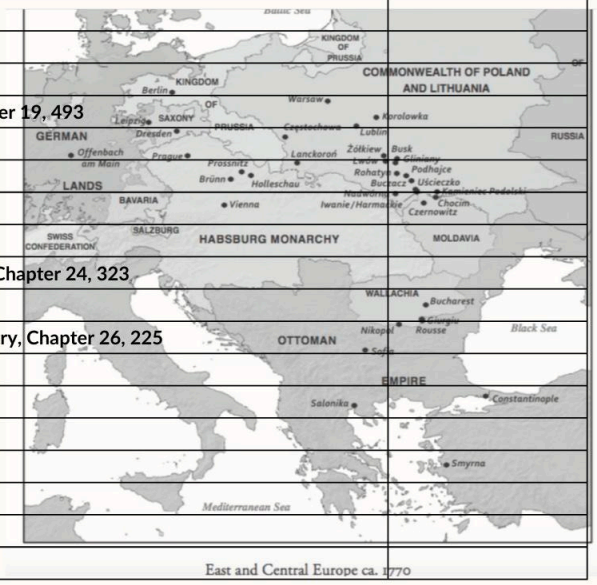
And I have updated the Slow Read page with this detachable one-page Slow Read Schedule.

Books of Jacob

2025 Slow Read Schedule

jeffrich.substack.com

NO	DATE	READING AND POSTS	PROGRESS
1	6-Jan-25	***Walter Benjamin Angel of History Audiobook & Jewish mysticism***	
2	13-Jan-25	***How to do The Books of Jacob Slow Read***	
3	20-Jan-25	***Essential Characters of Books of Jacob***	
4	27-Jan-25	***Historical context of the 'Other Europe' in The Books of Jacob***	
5	3-Feb-25	Prologue, 965	
6	10-Feb-25	**I. The Book of Fog, Chapter 1, 961**	
7	17-Feb-25	Chapter 2, 940	
8	24-Feb-25	Chapter 3, 928	
9	3-Mar-25	Chapter 4, 906	
10	10-Mar-25	**II The Book of Sand, Chapter 5, 873**	
11	17-Mar-25	Chapter 6, 848	
12	24-Mar-25	Chapter 7, 808	
13	31-Mar-25	Chapter 8, 794	
14	7-Apr-25	Chapter 9, 782	
15	14-Apr-25	Chapter 10, 764	
16	21-Apr-25	Chapter 11, 755	
17	28-Apr-25	Chapter 12, 734	
18	5-May-25	**III The Book of the Road, Chapter 13, 701**	
19	12-May-25	Chapter 14, 676	
20	19-May-25	Chapter 15, 642	
21	26-May-25	Chapter 16, 626	
22	2-Jun-25	Chapter 17, 584	
23	9-Jun-25	Chapter 18, 533	
24	16-Jun-25	**IV. The Book of the Comet, Chapter 19, 493**	
25	23-Jun-25	Chapter 20, 456	
26	30-Jun-25	Chapter 21, 413	
27	7-Jul-25	Chapter 22, 386	
28	14-Jul-25	Chapter 23, 340	
29	21-Jul-25	**V. The Book of Metal and Sulfur, Chapter 24, 323**	
30	28-Jul-25	Chapter 25, 293	
31	4-Aug-25	**VI. The Book of the Distant Country, Chapter 26, 225**	
32	11-Aug-25	Chapter 27, 175	
33	18-Aug-25	Chapter 28, 136	
34	25-Aug-25	Chapter 29, 97	
35	1-Sep-25	Chapter 30, 55	
36	8-Sep-25	Chapter 31, 29	
37	15-Sep-25	"A note on sources", 7	
38	22-Sep-25	***Looking back on the slow read***	



East and Central Europe ca. 1770

You can also download as a pdf here.

Paid subscribers may read my note below on the central character, Jacob Frank.

Subscribed

Tokarczuk became intrigued by the story of Jacob Frank, and his story is much better known in Poland today because of her novel. She was intrigued in part for why his extraordinary story was not better known. She is not a believer in Frank or Frankism, and has said she did not really like him. She studied him as a psychopathic, charismatic personality whose heresy yet many believed in.

He was a controversial and enigmatic figure in 18th-century Jewish and European history. His radical religious teachings and messianic claims made enemies in all faiths. Born in Podolia (modern-day Ukraine) in 1726, Frank emerged as a charismatic leader who challenged traditional Judaism and established a new religious movement.

In his early life, Frank travelled through the Ottoman Empire, and the Other Europe of Eastern Europe. He became influenced by several mystical traditions, especially Sabbateanism, a heretical Jewish movement founded by Sabbatai Zevi (or Tzevi) in the 17th century.

In 1755, Frank declared himself the reincarnation of Sabbatai Zevi and proclaimed his messianic status. He gathered a following of Jews who were drawn to his unconventional teachings, which included the rejection of traditional Jewish law and the promotion of antinomian practices. Frank's doctrine, known as Frankism, advocated for the transgression of religious taboos as a means of spiritual purification.

Frank's movement gained notoriety for its radical beliefs and practices, including alleged sexual rituals and the repudiation of the Talmud. In 1759, he and his followers converted to Catholicism in Poland, a move that was seen as both a strategic maneuver and a fulfillment of his syncretic religious vision.

Despite his conversion, Frank continued to face persecution and spent thirteen years imprisoned in the Częstochowa fortress. After his release in 1773, he moved to Moravia and later to Offenbach, Germany, where he lived as a wealthy nobleman, styling himself as "Baron of Offenbach".

Jacob Frank's legacy is complex and controversial, and we have eight months to consider it from all angles. Olga Tokarczuk provided a “Note on Sources,” like a true historian, at the end of Books of Jacob. There are two references on Jacob Frank that you may want to explore; but they are not needed to enjoy the novel.

- Jacob Frank, *The Collection of the Words of the Lord*, translated and edited by Harris Lenowitz
- Pawel Maciejko, *The Mixed Multitude: Jacob Frank and the Frankist Movement 1755-1816* (2011), which you can download in full here or buy https://amzn.to/3Wkzy7p

J. Michaelson, *The heresy of Jacob Frank : from Jewish messianism to esoteric myth* (2022) was published after the release of *The Book of Jacob*.

One Final Note

All that I have learned about Jacob Frank has come from reading the novel and following up its clues through google searches and books. I don't want to spoil that journey of discovery for you. I have kept Frank's story to an outline because the way Tokarczuk tells his story is magnificently dramatic.

So please use these notes as guides and enjoy the Slow Read of this remarkable character and historical enigma.

Timeline

Books of Jacob | Slow Read | History Timeline

file:///C:/Users/Souryatanu%20Saha/Downloads/Books_Of_Jacob_Slow_Read_Historical_Context_Timeline.pdf

This timeline provides reference points for the slow read of The Books of Jacob. Most of the story occurs in the four decades between 1750 and 1790. This period coincides with the disintegration and partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Events before 1750 and after 1790 are referenced in the novel, including the Holocaust of the twentieth century. I have taken this timeline up to 1918 when a Polish state returns after World War One and the Russian Revolutions.

THE BOOKS OF JACOB | TIMELINE

1640: The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth reaches its largest territorial extent.
1648: Khmelnytsky Uprising begins in Ukraine, leading to significant changes in the region's political landscape.
1651: Ukrainian Cossacks request protection from the Russian Tsar under the Treaty of Pereyaslav.
1655: The Swedish invasion known as "The Deluge" begins, supported by Transylvania and Brandenburg.
1657: Treaty of Bromberg forces Poland to renounce suzerainty over Prussia.
1660: Treaty of Oliva ends the Second Northern War between Sweden and Poland-Lithuania.
1664: The Polish Brethren, a Protestant group, are expelled from Poland.
1668: John II Casimir Vasa abdicates the Polish throne, ending the Vasa dynasty in Poland.
1672: Poland cedes Podolia to the Ottoman Empire in the Treaty of Buchach.
1673: John III Sobieski defeats the Ottomans at the Battle of Khotyn.
Created by Jeff Rich, The Burning Archive, https://jeffrich.substack.com 2025
1676: John III Sobieski is crowned King of Poland.
1683: Battle of Vienna - John III Sobieski leads a coalition to defeat the Ottoman Empire1.
1686: Treaty of Perpetual Peace between Poland and Russia.
1699: Treaty of Karlowitz marks the end of Ottoman control in much of Central Europe.
1700: The Great Northern War begins, involving Poland, Russia, and Sweden.
1704: Stanisław Leszczyński is elected King of Poland for the first time.
1709: Battle of Poltava - Russia defeats Sweden, changing the balance of power in Eastern Europe.
1717: Silent Sejm marks the beginning of Russian domination over Polish politics.
1720: Treaty of The Hague ends the Great Northern War for most participants

except Russia and Sweden.
1733: War of the Polish Succession begins.
1734: Stanisław Leszczyński is elected King of Poland for the second time.
1736: Augustus III becomes King of Poland, ending the War of the Polish Succession.
1740: Frederick II becomes King of Prussia, beginning a period of Prussian expansion.
1741: Silesian Wars begin between Prussia and Austria, affecting the balance of power in Central Europe.
1744: Maria Theresa of Austria grants new privileges to Jews in Moravia, contrasting with restrictions in Poland.
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1748: Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle ends the War of Austrian Succession, reshaping alliances in Europe.
1750: The Frankist movement, a Jewish religious movement, gains followers in Poland, causing tension with traditional Jewish communities.
1754: The Convocation Sejm in Poland passes resolutions against Jewish leaseholders, reflecting growing economic tensions.
1756: The Seven Years' War begins. It is a global conflict involving most of the European great powers, fought primarily in Europe and the Americas. One of the opposing alliances was led by Great Britain and Prussia. The other alliance was led by France and Austria, backed by Spain, Saxony, Sweden, and Russia.
1757: Augustus III of Poland, as Elector of Saxony, allies with Austria against Prussia in the Seven Years' War.
1760: The Council of Four Lands, the central body of Jewish autonomy in Poland, is dissolved by the Sejm.
1762: Catherine II becomes Empress of Russia, increasing Russian influence over Polish affairs.
1764: Stanisław August Poniatowski is elected as the last King of Poland with Russian support.
1765: Stanisław August Poniatowski establishes the School of Chivalry (Szkoła Rycerska) to educate future military and civil servants.
1766: The Sejm rejects King Stanisław's proposed reforms, showcasing internal political divisions.
1767: Radom Confederation forms, opposing King Stanisław's policies and supporting conservative nobles.
1767: Russian ambassador Nikolai Repnin arrests Polish senators opposing Russian interference.
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1768: Bar Confederation forms in opposition to Russian influence and King Stanisław.
1768: The Sejm passes the Cardinal Laws, guaranteeing religious freedoms but maintaining Catholic dominance.
1768: Ottoman Empire declares war on Russia, indirectly supporting the Bar

Confederation.
1769: Habsburg monarchy annexes a small territory of Spisz from Poland.
1770: First partition of Poland is proposed by Frederick II of Prussia to Russia.
1771: Bar confederates attempt to kidnap King Stanisław, damaging their reputation.
1772: First Partition of Poland by Russia, Prussia, and Austria.
1773: Partition Sejm ratifies the First Partition under Russian military threat.
1773: Commission of National Education established, an early ministry of education.
1774: Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca between Russia and the Ottoman Empire.
1775: Permanent Council established in Poland, further limiting the king's power.
1776: American Revolution begins, influencing Polish reformers.
1778: War of Bavarian Succession involves Prussia and Austria.
1780: Free Royal Cities movement begins, advocating for urban rights in Poland.
1783: Russia annexes the Crimean Khanate in the Black Sea region.
1786: Prussian-Polish trade war begins, damaging the economy.
1787: Russo-Turkish War begins, creating a window of opportunity for Polish reforms.
Created by Jeff Rich, The Burning Archive, https://jeffrich.substack.com 2025
1788: Four-Year Sejm begins, aiming to reform the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.
1790: Polish-Prussian Alliance signed, attempting to balance Russian influence.
1791: May 3 Constitution is adopted in Poland, Europe's first written national constitution following the USA model.
1792: Polish-Russian War, also known as the War in Defense of the Constitution.
1793: Second Partition of Poland by Russia and Prussia.
1794: Kościuszko Uprising against Russian and Prussian rule.
1795: Third Partition of Poland, ending the existence of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.
1797: Jewish Hasidic movement gains significant following in Eastern Europe.
1799: Partition of the Polish crown jewels by Prussia, Russia, and Austria.
1807: Duchy of Warsaw is created by Napoleon as a Polish state.
1815: Congress of Vienna establishes the Kingdom of Poland under Russian control.
1830: November Uprising begins in Poland against Russian rule.
1846: Kraków Uprising attempts to liberate Polish lands from Austrian rule.
1848: Greater Poland Uprising against Prussian rule.
1861: Alexander II emancipates the serfs in Russia, affecting many in former Polish territories.
1863: January Uprising begins against Russian rule in former Polish-Lithuanian territories.
Created by Jeff Rich, The Burning Archive, https://jeffrich.substack.com 2025
1867: Austro-Hungarian Compromise creates the dual monarchy, affecting Galicia.

1881: Waves of pogroms against Jews begin in the Russian Empire, including former Polish territories.
1897: General Jewish Labour Bund founded in Vilna, present-day Vilnius.
1905: Russian Revolution of 1905 affects Polish territories under Russian control.
1918: Poland regains independence after World War I.

Books of Jacob | Slow Read | Context

History of the ‘Other Europe’ 1640 to 1800

Jan 27, 2025

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Article voiceover

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Olga Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob* is an historical novel inspired by Tokarczuk’s curiosity about why the astonishing story of Jacob Frank was so little known, even in Poland.

So don’t worry if you don’t know much of the history. Tokarczuk brings the history to life brilliantly in this novel. The story of Jacob Frank, his followers and his opponents will intrigue you as much as it did Tokarczuk.

You do not need to read histories of Poland or the Frankist movement or Judaism before reading the novel. You can do what I did. I dived into the book and let it teach me the history. I looked up names, ideas, references, and places on the internet as I went. I learned so much about the history of Poland, Eastern Europe, Judaism, the Ottoman Empire and the 'Other Europe' just by reading this wonderful novel.

How Tokarczuk Wrote *The Books of Jacob*

It does help to keep in mind Tokarczuk's approach to writing history. *The Books of Jacob* was her first venture into history writing. She never previously had much interest in historical novels. She thought they often presented clichés of the past. But she became a history buff through writing and researching the novel over eight years. She was meticulous and faithful. She went to archives and gave voice to forgotten characters. She checked facts with historians. She saw the many possibilities of interpreting this fantastic journey with her imagination.

In "How I Wrote *The Books of Jacob*", she wrote:

> *The Books of Jacob* is a historical novel written in the full knowledge that the binding historical narrative is something that has been formulated over and over again. … Of course, it is impossible to leave oneself and one's own time behind entirely. In this sense the historical novel doesn't exist, because its roots are always stuck in the author's present day. History is simply a never-ending interpretation of real and imagined events from the past that allows us to perceive formerly invisible meanings in it.

It also helps to approach this history of the "Other Europe" (Eastern Europe, Ottoman Europe, religious heresies) as intertwined with the familiar histories of the West or Western Europe that are better known. Of course, the Holocaust and the long centuries of the persecution of Jewish people figure in the history. Tokarczuk says she cannot imagine Polish History without Jewish history, although there is a powerful

tradition of Polish history that presents Poland as a martyred Catholic country.

Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at its peak, 1619

Other familiar events from 'Western' history appear in the novel: the Seven Years War (which many historians describe today as the true first

‘world war’), the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. The story even reaches, at one point, the United States Supreme Court.

History of the ‘Other Europe’ 1640 to 1800

The events of the novel span the rise of Frankism, major political changes in Poland-Lithuania, and the broader context of Jewish messianic movements in the 18th century. It invites readers to consider the nature of belief, power, and identity in a turbulent historical period.

Some of the themes of historical context dramatised in the novel are:

- **Religious Syncretism**: Jacob and his followers blend elements of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and there were similar blends of mysticism and enlightenment across Europe at this time.
- **Religious Conflict**: Tensions between Jews, Catholics, and other religious groups grew in Poland. The Counter-Reformation was influencing Europe, and Islam had its own tensions with Sufi sects and more orthodox beliefs.

- **Power and Charisma**: The novel explores Jacob's ability to attract and manipulate followers. Why do people follow charismatic flawed gurus?
- **Identity and Transformation**: Characters frequently change names, religions, and allegiances.
- **Colonial Dynamics**: The book examines Poland's role as a colonial power over non-Polish territories, and how it related to the power of the Catholic Church and prestige of the Polish nobility.
- **Historical Complexity**: Tokarczuk weaves together multiple perspectives and genres to create a rich tapestry of 18th-century life, which she takes great care to reproduce accurately.
- **Women's Roles**: Women play crucial roles in the story, including powerful figures like Kossakowska and writers like Drużbacka
- **Boundaries and Border-Crossing**: The novel explores how people cross geographical, moral, political, and spiritual boundaries. They did it then. They do it now.
- **The Enlightenment and Cultural Exchange**: The Enlightenment was affecting many countries, including Poland. European and Ottoman cultures exchanged ideas and practices. Mystics and scientists did too.

The End of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

Finally, most of the story occurs in the four decades between 1750 and 1790. This period coincides with the disintegration and partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Over the course of the *Slow Read* I will provide weekly bite-sized insights into the historical context of the novel.

Below the paywall for paid subscribers, I have some extra notes on Polish-Lithuanian history.

And as a bonus for paid subscribers, I share a downloadable pdf with a **history timeline from 1640 to 1918 as a reference guide.**

To help you follow the background events and fantastic journeys of *The Books of Jacob*.

Subscribed

Exclusive Audio and History Timeline Downloadable for paid subscribers

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The borders of Poland have changed many times throughout the country's history, expanding and shrinking (or even vanishing), moving between the Baltic and the Black Seas, and the Oder and the Dnieper Rivers. Jacob Frank moved across this area, and died in the years before the final Partition of Poland that saw it vanish from the map.

Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki, *A Concise History of Poland* (2019, 3rd edition) identified three periods in Polish history up until the end of Jacob's life:

- Piast Poland, ?–1385 (a reference to a dynastic ruler)
- Jagiellonian Poland, 1386–1572 (a reference to the dynastic family)
- The Commonwealth of the Two Nations, 1572–1795

Most of the story occurs in the four decades between 1750 and 1790. This period coincides with the disintegration and partition of the Commonwealth of the Two Nations, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

I have prepared a timeline that focuses on events in the wider Eastern Europe, religious conflicts, and the key events related to the disintegration of Poland-Lithuania over the course of Jacob Frank's life.

Events before 1750 and after 1790 are referenced in the novel, including the Holocaust of the twentieth century. I have taken this timeline up to 1918 when a Polish state returns after World War One and the Russian Revolutions.

The timeline does not present any spoilers related to the novel as such. I will provide a timeline related to Jacob Frank, his movement, and the books of the novel later during the Slow Read.

This history timeline provides reference points so you can enjoy the slow read of *The Books of Jacob*. Many of these events are referenced and partly explained in the novel. But it does help to have a handy reference guide.

Of course, historians differ on how to interpret these events. Those debates can wait for another day. I hope the timeline helps you follow the wonderful chaotic story Tokarczuk has given us.

Book 1- Book of Fog

Prologue

Books of Jacob | Slow Read | Prologue

The story begins with a woman, Yente. Or does it begin the story of the story?

She swallows a piece of paper on which letters were written.

Then she wakes, although she thought she was dead.

She sees a man clumsily care for her. His name is Isaac Shorr.

But his mistakes do not trouble her. Something rich and strange has happened because she swallowed the piece of paper.

We do not yet know what it is. But,

> "This is how it is now, how it will be: Yente sees all." (p. 964)

This prologue is barely one page long. You will not need one whole week to read it.

So, take your time over the pages before the Prologue.

There is a map with all the places we will visit on this fantastic journey.

There is a table of contents with seven Books, thirty-one chapters, and many sub-headings. If you browse through the table of contents, you will meet the characters, dates, and story arc of this novel.

You may even notice that the final section of Book Seven, chapter thirty-one is titled, 'Yente'. What does this clue hidden in plain sight tell us about the story of *The Books of Jacob*?

Every week during the Slow Read I will share three bonus elements for paid subscribers to enrich your Slow Read.

- a **chat question**, from which I am keen to her your experience of the book
- a viewpoint on **characters**, as they appeared in fiction and history
- a story that puts The Books of Jacob in its historical **context .**

Please subscribe and read on to get more from your Slow Read of The Books of Jacob

Subscribed

Chat question

Who or what intrigues you most about The Books of Jacob?

You can respond to this chat question directly in the comments section.

I will also post a chat thread for paid subscribers in which you can share your response, your questions, highlighted passages, or indeed anything you would like to share about reading *The Books of Jacob* this week.

I am very much looking forward to reading your experiences, insights and perspectives. I will be learning from you about this book and history as we read along together. There is so much I do not know!

Viewpoint on Character - Jacob

We meet two characters in the Prologue, Yente and Isaac Shoor. I will write notes on both these characters in later posts. But it seems right to begin with the person we already know the book is about Jacob Frank.

The Prologue says nothing about him, but the preceding table of contents and map do. The Books are named oddly, as if they were written in some kabbalistic code: Fog, Sand, Metal and Sulfur. Are these the books of Jacob? The Book of the Comet suggests omens. The Book of the Distant Country suggests exile, a common fate in history for the Jews.

I have already disclosed the essential events of Jacob Frank's life in my post on the essential characters. We know he was born in 1726. His first name was Yankiev Liebowicz in 1726. He became a charismatic leader. He inspired, converted, and disappointed. He died in 1791.

But even before he had died there were many stories of Jacob that reached beyond the single body that this Polish Jew, Yankiev Liebowicz, inhabited. Jacob Frank was a legend, or rather many legends. He was boor and prophet, trickster and "holy fool," frustrated failure and world-historic figure, charlatan and lover. These legends were made in the minds of his followers and opponents, as much as in the facts of Jacob's historical life.

The Books of Jacob recreates these many perspectives on Jacob Frank. We almost never see him directly, but through the eyes of other characters. Like a historian, we work through the books of Jacob that his contemporaries left behind. We piece together the mystery of this Jacob who inspired belief and heresy, hope and hate, fear and love in others.

There is only one narrator of Jacob's story who we might rely on. A woman called Yente who, as we learned in the Prologue, sees all. And you may be wondering what is Jacob's connection to Yente? We will learn the answer to that question shortly in the Book of Fog.

Historical Context

There are several books on Jacob Frank that are listed in Tokarczuk's 'Note on Sources' at the end of the novel. Historians dispute the meaning of Frank's legend as much the characters in the book.

During the Slow Read, I will introduce insights from these histories. But my advice is not to let them get in the way of Tokarczuk's magical narrative. If you want a quick orientation to this controversial figure,

however, you can quickly read the Jewish Virtual Library's entry on Frank.

The more important context for this week takes us back to Yente, and how this old Jewish woman's near-death experience enabled Olga Tokarczuk to write *The Books of Jacob*.

In the clip below (from an appearance at the Centre Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona in late 2024 via their YouTube channel), Olga Tokarczuk explains in her own words—and in English—the importance of Yente to this novel. She points you to the clue hidden in the Table of Contents about the story of the writing of The Books of Jacob?

Chapter 1

Books of Jacob | I. Book of Fog, Chapter 1

"fog subsumes every passing view, each scene as fleeting as a flake of dissolving snow”

> “But the vicar forane sees no more—the fog subsumes every passing view, each scene as fleeting as a flake of dissolving snow.”
>
> Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob*, I. Fog, Chapter 1, p. 957

In chapter 1 Father Benedykt Chmielowski enters the fog of a small town in Podolia, Rohatyn, in search of some special Jewish books he believes are held by the Shorr family. He pushes through the fog and his own discomfort with the busy, multilingual market he finds there. He hopes to use them to write a book that will spread knowledge. But what will come of this meeting of a humble parish priest and his encounter with this secret book of the Jews?

The character this week is **Benedykt Chmielowski**. I learned to pronounce his surname only recently. Olga Tokarczuk is here to help you right now.

In the novel, Chmielowski becomes the *vicar forane* of Rohatyn after beginning his vocation in a small presbytery in Firlejów. A *vicar forane* is appointed by a local bishop to oversee the priests of a particular area. But Father Benedykt loves books, much more than supervising people.

The story begins in 1752, when Rohatyn was the part of Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania. We know from history (no spoilers) that this Poland will cease to exist in 1795, within the lifespan of the characters of this novel.

Today, Rohatyn is in Western Ukraine. Many places that we will visit on this Slow Read have changed nations, names, identities and spelling over the years, including one main city of the novel, Lwów.

For paid subscribers below I have some more notes to enrich your Slow Read.

- **chat question** - about this first "Book of Fog"
- **character**, **Benedykt Chmielowski** - a clip of Olga Tokarczuk talking about his role in the novel and in history
- **context** - stories that places this little market town of Rohatyn in the historical of multicultural Eastern Europe.

If you have not already done so, please upgrade your subscription, and read on to get more from your Slow Read of *The Books of Jacob.*

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Chat questions - Fog

How many references to fog can you find in this first 'Book of Fog'?

What do you think the 'fog' symbolises, especially if Chmielowski is part of the Enlightenment?

You can respond to this chat question directly in the comments section.

I will also post a chat thread for paid subscribers in which you can share your response, your questions, highlighted passages, or indeed anything you would like to share about reading *The Books of Jacob* this week.

I look forward to reading your experiences, insights, and perspectives.

Character - Benedykt Chmielowski

This clip from Olga Tokarczuk gives some insight into why she says, in the "Note on Sources" (p. 6) that "It brought me great joy to work on the character of Benedykt Chmielowski."

In the clip, Tokarczuk refers to some entries in Chmielowski's first Polish Encyclopaedia that many Poles laugh about today. There are more examples in this article, 10 quotations from Chmielowski's *New Athens*.

But she does not mock him. She tells his story with tenderness, an important word for Tokarczuk as explained in her lecture, *The Tender Narrator*. This article on Benedykt Chmielowski's *New Athens* suggests why. His book, *New Athens*, was a scientific effort made by a man with a passion for spreading knowledge (see pages 946-945 *BoJ*). His passion exceeded his capacities, but as Chmielowski himself said, quoting Pliny the Elder:

'No book is so bad that it fails to provide at least partial help.'

Benedykt Chmielowski

Context

Chmielowski's character is comic because he is better with books than real life. Throughout the novel, he tries to make sense of the changing, diverse society around him, but withdraws into his poor study. In Chapter 1, Chmielowski enters the market square of Rohatyn and is a little overwhelmed by all the 'exuberant Jews', people and goods from Stamboul, Wallachia, Hungary, Armenia and more, and the many languages of Eastern Europe.

When the story begins, Rohatyn is part of the multicultural, multilingual Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania, before the hard boundaries of national identity separated the languages, religions, sects, and cultures of Europe. It is close to the border of Ottoman Europe. It was a place of blurred borders and uneasy co-existence.

Two centuries earlier, in 1520, Rohatyn was raided by Crimean Tatars. One woman of the town was captured and sold to the Ottoman Sultan,

Suleiman the Magnificent. Nastia Lisovska or Roxelana would become Hürrem Sultan, the Sultan's concubine, then legal wife, and finally *haseki sultan* or imperial consort, a powerful figure in the Ottoman Empire. Today her statue stands in Rohatyn. (Marc David Baer, *The Ottomans: Khans, Caesars and Caliphs*, 2021).

Roxelana or Hürrem Sultan, born in Rohatyn, later Imperial Consort of Ottoman Empire

Two centuries later, the town was still small, but half of its population of 7,500 were Jewish. During the war, 99 percent of this Jewish community died in the Holocaust and other violence.

It is not an accident, if you believe in accidents, that Tokarczuk begins *The Books of Jacob* in Rohatyn.

As Jacob Mikanowski writes in *Goodbye Eastern Europe: An Intimate History of a Divided Land:*

> "For much of its history, Eastern Europe was a frontier society, pushing into territories that had been previously uncultivated or that had been depopulated by long-running frontier wars. Multiple waves of settlement gave much of it a character quite unlike Western Europe… In Eastern Europe, it was common to see Catholic and Orthodox Christians living in close proximity with Jews and Muslims. This overlapping of multiple religions made it hard to enforce the dogma of any individual faith. Eastern Europe thus became a haven for religious misfits and heretics. Groups such as the Bogomils, Hussites, Frankists and Alevis left a deep imprint on the region's culture."
>
> Mikanowski, *Goodbye Eastern Europe,* p. xvii

This slow read will be a fantastic journey of discovery of those many cultures.

Thanks for joining me on it

Chapter 2

Books of Jacob | I. Book of Fog, Chapter 2

"Kossakowska has animal instincts, like a she-wolf in a pack of males"

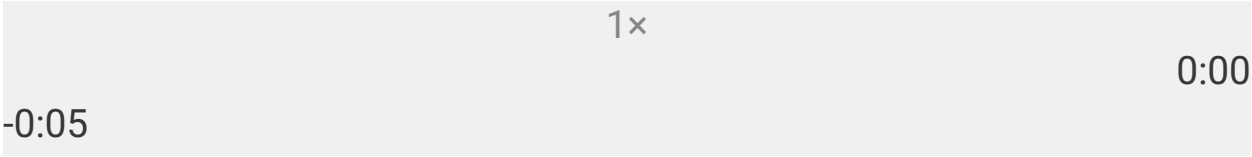
> “Now bloodstains have flooded these joyful little flowers, their ominous, irregular contours completely swallowing up any ordered pattern. As if malicious forces had escaped from somewhere, surfacing here.”
>
> Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob*, I. Fog, Chapter 2, p. 936

In chapter 2, the Polish noblewoman Katarzyna Kossakowska travels from Lublin to her family estate in Kamieniec with her companion Elżbieta Drużbacka. Period pain and a broken carriage force a stop in Rohatyn where the women seek help from a reluctant, distant cousin, Szymon Labęcki. He calls on a local Jewish doctor, Asher Rubin to treat Kossakowska.

Father Benedykt Chmielowski visits the noble visitor to Rohatyn. He discovers the book he received from the Shorr family was not the special, secret book he had hoped for. He also meets Elżbieta Drużbacka, who is

a poet, reader of his works, and a woman with whom he can talk about ideas. Over dinner, Kossakowska discusses with her guests her views on politics, the economy and the Jewish people in Poland. But most of all, Chmielowski and Drużbacka begin an intriguing friendship.

The character this week is **Katarzyna Kossakowska**. Again, this week, Olga Tokarczuk is on hand to help us pronounce this name in Polish.



> Katarzyna Kossakowska, neé Potocka, wife of the castellan of Kamieniec, whose dominion extends over numerous villages and towns, mansions and estates, is by nature a predator. Predators, even after falling into dire straits, such as into the grips of a poacher's trap, lick their wounds and go back into battle. Kossakowska has animal instincts, like a she-wolf in a pack of males.
>
> (Tokarczuk, *Books of Jacob*, p.934)

Kossakowska is married to a Kossakowski. Names in Polish, as in other Slavic languages, have gendered endings. A male member of the Kossakowska family is a Kossakowski. Katarzyna came from Potocka/Potocki family

She is a grandee of the Polish aristocracy, known as the *Szlachta*, who by accident of a loose wheel and a period ends up in this town of Rohatyn with its connections to Jewish sects and, in some way that we do not yet know, Jacob Frank.

Portrait of Katarzyna Kossakowska née Potocka (1720–1801) National Museum of Warsaw, 1782

For paid subscribers below I have some more notes to enrich your Slow Read.

- **chat question** - about women in historical fiction, and reading about this “she-wolf in a pack of males”
- **character**, **Katarzyna Kossakowska** - a clip of Olga Tokarczuk talking about her role in the novel and in history
- **context** - Polish society, the Szlachta and hints of intolerance.

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Chat questions - Women in History

In this interview, Tokarczuk comments that women are often erased from history, and this was a powerful motivator for her when she wrote her historical novel. She notes that women played major roles in Jacob Frank’s movement and, like Kossakowska, Polish politics, but their role was obscured in memory and history. She compares the process to the major role of women in the Solidarity movement in Poland in the 1970s and 1980s.

What have you noticed already about the way that Tokarczuk presents the women in Books of Jacob?

You can respond to this chat question directly in the comments section.

I will also post a chat thread for paid subscribers in which you can share your response, your questions, highlighted passages, or indeed anything you would like to share about reading *The Books of Jacob* this week.

I look forward to reading your experiences, insights, and perspectives.

Character - Katarzyna Kossakowska

This clip from Olga Tokarczuk talks about Katarzyna.

Like Chmielowski Katarzyna Kossakowska was a real historical person who played a major role in both Polish politics and the private courts of Polish noble women. Tokarczuk's portrait draws on Kossakowska's correspondence and snippets from a 1961 book. I was able to find this article from 2017 on Kossakowska. It is in Polish, but can be easily translated by Google.

Context - The Polish Szlachta or Nobility

Kossakowska holds court in Rohatyn, and her poet companion Drużbacka is a member of her 'private court'. The great families of Poland were astonishingly wealthy, and leading women did conduct private courts that, like French 18th century salons, supported political networks, patronised the arts, and gossiped. You can explore this world of women's private courts in the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania at this website.

More broadly, the Polish Nobility or Szlachta played a major role in the political culture of Poland. The Szlachta has rights and privileges unlike other European societies in the 18th century. They were protected from taxation and prosecution. They were guaranteed representation in the Sejm (political assembly), and from 1572 chose the King of Poland in an elective assembly. They also has through the Sejm a special veto right over legislation, that became known as the Golden Liberty.

Not all Szlachta were wealthy. At its peak, the gentry class were approximately ten per cent of society. Many were quite impoverished. But the great magnate families—the Czartoryski, Potocki, Radziwiłł, Zamoyski, Lubomirski and Branicki—were hugely wealthy, with vast estates of exploited serfs, and used their political power to oppose the central authority of the royal power. In addition, although there were traditions of multifaith tolerance in Polish political culture, the Slachta grew over the 18th century more Polonized, more adamantly Catholic, and more hostile to the Jews who enjoyed some level of protection from the central royal authority as merchants.

One common view on the Szlachta is that they caused the dissolution of the country in the three Partitions of Poland from the 1770s. Sanford, George. *Historical Dictionary of Poland (*2003) wrote, "This corrupt and largely parasitic class was instrumental in causing the Commonwealth's decline." However, another argument is that the decentralisation, Golden Liberty, and private courts contributed to the cultural flowering and political experimentation in late 18th century Poland (Anna

Grzeskowiak-Krwawicz, *Queen Liberty: the concept of freedom in the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth*, 2012).

We will see stories supporting both arguments unfold in *The Books of Jacob.*

Chapter 3

Books of Jacob | I. Book of Fog, Chapter 3

"Fog is turbid water, and all sorts of evil spirits travel in it, spirits that cloud the minds of animal and man."

> “Along the way, they got swept up in a dense fog, and when that happened, all of a sudden, all of the wedding guests began to feel uncomfortable, and that was precisely when Yente started to groan like she needed the others to pay her some attention. Fog is turbid water, and all sorts of evil spirits travel in it, spirits that cloud the minds of animal and man.”
>
> Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob*, I. Fog, Chapter 3, p. 915

In chapter 3, we learn more about Asher Rubin, the medical Jew who helped the noble Katarzyna Kossakowska, but who feels trapped in Rohatyn, and searches for my enlightened insight into the world. We enter the “beehive” of the Shorr family and through it the social world of the Jews of Podolia. In the same house in which Yente escapes death, there is a wedding that will enlarge the Shorr family. We learn about the study of the Torah and the Zohar, the secret book that Chmielowski was

searching for. The Shorrs write letters from these books on an amulet which Yente swallows and from then “Yente’s vision knows no such borders after all” (p. 907).

Eduard Gurevich, Old Poland. Wedding in Shtetl. Painting

The character this week is **the Shorr family and specifically its patriarch Rabbi Elisha Shorr**. In "The beehive, or: The home of the Shorr family in Rohatyn", Tokarczuk writes

> In the Shorr's house on the market square as well as in several others—for the Shorr family is big and has many branches—preparations for the wedding are ongoing. One of the sons is getting married.
>
> (Tokarczuk, *Books of Jacob*, p.925)

Yente describes Elisha as a "bitter and dissatisfied man." His only daughter Hayah is a prophetess. His home is central to Jewish life in Rohatyn. The Shorrs will play a major role in the novel. They represent Jewish society in 18th century Poland, and how Jacob Frank will change it.

For paid subscribers below I have some more notes to enrich your Slow Read.

- **chat question** -
- **character**, **the Shorr family** - I have drawn up a family tree of the Shorr family for you to refer to through the novel
- **context** - Jews in 18th century Poland and how Jacob Frank will catalyse change.

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Chat questions -

Reading *The Books of Jacob* has opened a window for me onto Jewish history and culture. There is still so much for me to learn, even as I prepare these notes week-to week. Please share any stories of the culture and history of the Jews of 18th century Eastern Europe that you know to enrich our slow read experience.

What stories of the culture and history of the Jews of 18th century Eastern Europe would you like to share with me and other readers?

You can respond to this chat question directly in the comments section.

I will also post a chat thread for paid subscribers in which you can share your response, your questions, highlighted passages, or indeed anything you would like to share about reading *The Books of Jacob* this week.

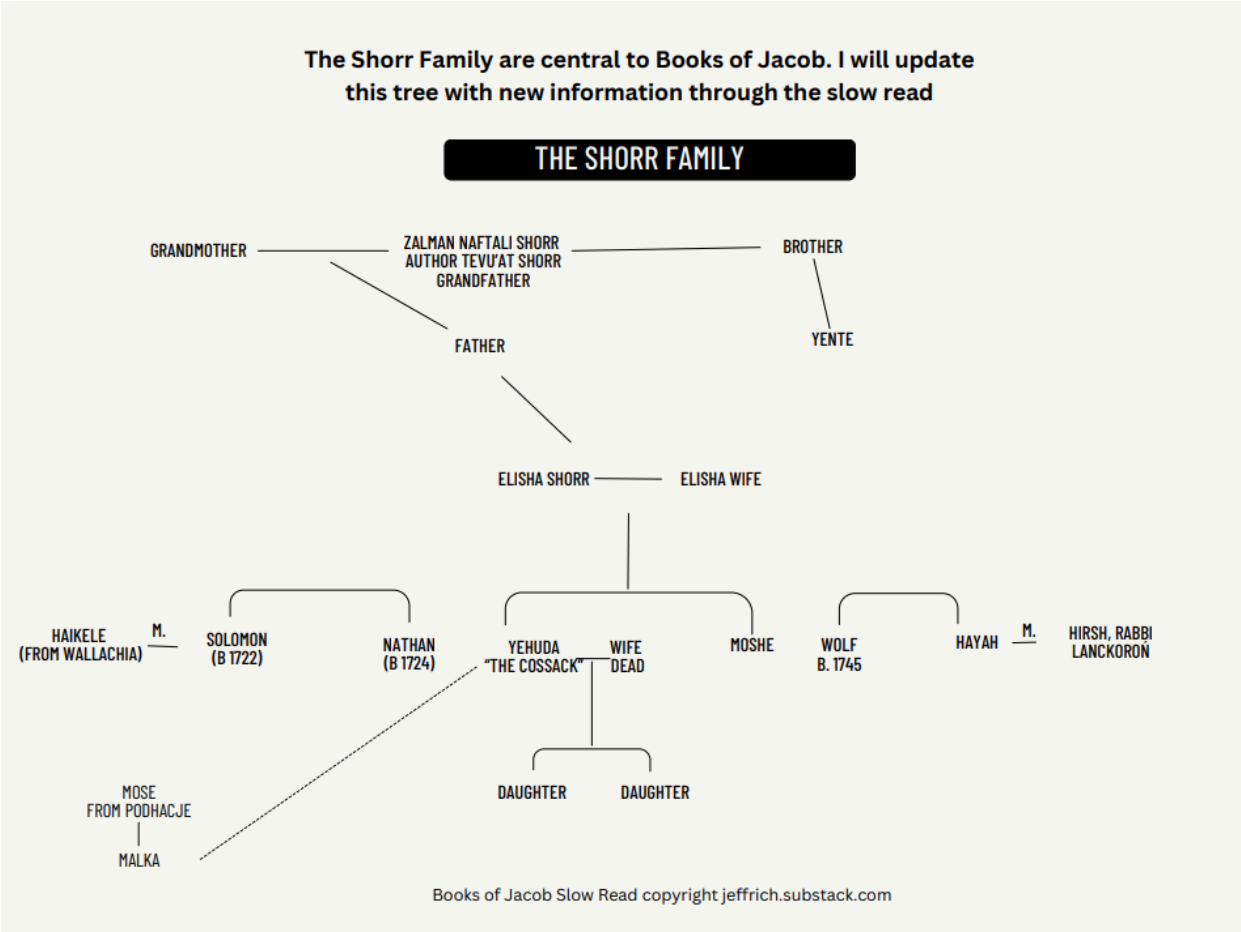
I look forward to reading your experiences, insights, and perspectives.

Character - Elisha Shorr and Family

The Shorr Family will become a core group in Jacob Frank's story and will experience many of the "misfortunes to come."

They will come and go, change, and convert throughout the novel. This family tree can help you as a reference guide to this central family. It visualises the information from chapter three but has no later spoilers. I will update it as we read along. There are many transformations that will unfold later in the novel.

Shorr Family Tree Week 3



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Context - Jews in 18th century Poland

In the 14th century the Polish king, Casimir the Great (1333-70) began to support settlement of the Jews, exiled and persecuted in Western Europe, in the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth. Over time they thrived in the economic and commercial life. Their enterprises in towns succeeded,

even if on the outskirts of towns from which they were officially excluded. They became the effective economic agents of the *szlachta,* which we looked at last week.

In Podolia and Polish Ukraine this relationship bred resentment which led to the Cossack or Khmelnitsky Rebellion in the mid seventeenth century. However, after these shocking massacres, the Jewish population, culture and society rebounded. And problems simmered. Polish historians Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadski, writing from the standpoint of the history of the Polish state, focus on the resentment:

> "Even in the Polish Ukraine, the Jews were rapidly restored. Nowhere in Europe were there so many Jews as in Poland-Lithuania (around a million by the 1770s). But their dominance of much of commercial and economic life, their distinctive faith and culture, also gave rise to resentment, envy and hatreds which have never fully been excised.
>
> (*A Concise History of Poland,* 3rd edition, 2019, p. 131)

Simon Schama in his stunning *Belonging: The Story of the Jews 1492-1900* (2017), however, focuses on the rebound and the characteristics of Jewish society and culture that made the Jews of Poland, and specifically Podolia, in 1752 such a visible and vital force. The population quadrupled over the century after the Khmelnitsky Rebellion. The culture spread more widely than the image of the folk hamlet or shtetl with rabbi, matchmaker, slaughterer, and mystic.

> There were such places. But the vast majority of Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the eighteenth century… lived in urban crowds in true towns like Satanow, of at least three thousand and often many more."
>
> (Schama, *Belonging*, p. 429)

They did not live in a "closed-doors culture" and they were not subject to restrictive dress codes. Their success, moreover, sprang from deeper sources than the economic relationship with the Szlachta. Marraige patterns, extended family social support, and the local community

insittions of the kehillah (congregation) and governing kahal strengthened Jewish society in Eastern Europe.

> People driven from one town to another by misfortune of one kind of another would expect to find in their new place of abode or asylum the usual: synagogues big and small; Hebrew schools and houses of study; a rabbinical court which would adjudicate grievances and disputes.
>
> (Schama, *Belonging*, p. 445)

They would expect to find, in other words, a Beehive such as that created by the Shorr family in Rohatyn.

One brief section Schama, *Belonging*, Chapter 12 "Poh-Lin" in the section "The Stones of Podolia" (pp. 423-445) provides a brilliant account of the social world of the Shorr family and the context of Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob*. It is worth a read, but I would stop at page 445 if you want to avoid spoilers.

Schama himself gives you a warning. Commenting on the social world of the Podolian Jews, he writes

> "This does not mean that shtetls were immune to contention and shock. And the greatest of all such shocks arrived in Podolia in the middle of the eighteenth century and very nearly broke Polish Jewry altogether."
>
> (Schama, *Belonging*, p. 445)

That shock, of course, was Jacob Frank.

Chapter 4

Books of Jacob | I. Book of Fog, Chapter 4

"A true writer has no biography."

Mar 03, 2025

· Paid

> The story of the priest's life is the story of the books he read and wrote. A true writer has no biography…. In this way he [Benedykt Chmielowski] discovered that writing saves."
>
> Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob*, I. Fog, Chapter 4, p. 891

In chapter 4, the priest Benedykt Chmielowski learns the limits of his bookish knowledge. His new friend Elżbieta Drużbacka gently chides him by making his books incomprehensible to most Poles and educated women by publishing them in Latin. They begin their correspondence. It will become one of the delights of this novel, "giving one fantastic pretexts for thinking of how very great and complex this world is" (p. 887).

More fatefully, we meet Bishop Kajetan Sołtyk, coadjutor of Kiev. He broods on his compulsion to play cards. He hocks his episcopal jewellery

to pay his debts. He broods on his hatred of the Jews, and his revulsion that Poland is too full of the Jews. Vibrant Jewish society threatens to replace the cultural dominion of the Catholic Church. He defies the Pope's own edicts to spread the malicious 'blood libel'

Bishop Kajetan Sołtyk by Marcello Bacciarelli, National Museum in Wrocław 1750.

Kajetan Sołtyk is the character this week. The portrait of him housed near Tokarczuk's home was painted two years before the action of this chapter. You can see the ring he hocked near the centre of the frame.

Tokarczuk describes his love of cards as a philosophy of life and society:

> “cards unite people better than faith or language. You sit down at the table, you fan out your cards, and there follows an order that is understandable to anyone. And one must simply adapt to that order, if one wishes to win.” (p. 905)

Sołtyk represents the Catholic Church, a powerful institution in 18th century Poland. His resentments, libels, debts, and religion will drive forward Jacob Frank’s story to tragedy. His later impact on Jacob explains why many orthodox Jews believe Frank betrayed them.

For paid subscribers below I have some more notes to enrich your Slow Read.

- **chat question** - about the book that Tokarczuk’s subtitle epigram came from.
- **character**, **Kajetan Sołtyk** - another real, controversial historical character
- **context** - the Catholic Church in 18th century Poland**.**

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Chat question

Did you like the banter between Chmielowski and Drużbacka about the New Athens book and its title on pp. 896-895? And how Chmielowski imagined New Athen to be a little like a Google search

> "The priest answers modestly that what he would like is to create a compendium of knowledge of the sort that could be found in every home. And in it a little about everything, so that a person might reach for such a book whenever there is something he does not know, and there he might find it." (p. 896)

Could it be that Chmielowski "invented the internet" and that the Books of Jacob is a reflection on the era of fake news?

You can respond to this chat question directly in the comments section.

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I look forward to reading your experiences, insights, and perspectives.

Character - Kajetan Sołtyk

Kajetan Sołtyk (1715 – 1788) was a Polish Catholic priest, who became bishop of Kiev from 1756, and bishop of Kraków from 1759. These events will appear in the novel. Revealing them now does not spoil the meaning of the events. I will not add more because his promotions are so central to the story of *The Books of Jacob*.

Instead let me add a small note on the family background of Sołtyk. Kajetan grew up as the son of a leading official who served the Potocki family, from which Katarzyna Kossakowska came.

His online biography can be translated from Polish online here, or you can check the Wikipedia entry here, if you are curious.

Context - the Catholic Church in Poland

Many of my generation would imagine Poland is a deeply Catholic society. Pope John Paul II was Polish. It was a source of strength to resist communist rule. In the post-1945 period over 95 per cent of Poles were baptised Catholic. But this religiosity has faded over the last decade while at the same time the Law and Justice Party sought to restore traditional values.

This Catholic purity, however, was a result of history. Before the Holocaust many more Poles were Jews. For centuries before the 1919-1945 waves of Polish and German antisemitism, the Church had purged dissenters and rival faiths.

But there was a time when Poland was renowned for its religious tolerance. It was a "state without stakes," meaning it did not burn its heretics. This tolerance helped to make Poland as a 'paradise for the Jews' (p. 903). This changed from the 1600s, driven by the Counter-Reformation, the Jesuits, the institutional power of the Church,

the social power of the nobility, and the Polonisation of places like current day Ukraine. In the 1700s the Church amplified the social decay of Poland and its political disintegration during the events of *The Books of Jacob*. It turned Poland from a paradise to a place of persecution of the Jews.

Kajetan Sołtyk's career would be central to that persecution. But would it do him any good?

Book 2- Book of Sand

Chapter 5

Books of Jacob | II. Book of Sand, Chapter 5

"can those without the sixth sense be merely bewildered by mystical souls"

> And just as a man born blind knows not what light might be, or a deaf man music, or a man without a sense of smell the plenitude of flowers, so, too, can those without the sixth sense be merely bewildered by mystical souls, take them for madmen, for fanatics, for people who make up such things for reasons unknown. ″
>
> (Nahman, *Scraps*) Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob*, II. Sand, Chapter 5, p. 859

In Chapter 5, Jacob's story leaves the fog and enters the sand. Or does the sand run through our fingers as we hold the book? What do you think the symbol of sand represents?

Most of this chapter is narrated through the eyes of Nahman Samuel ben Levi of Busk (referred to mostly as Nahman). He writes his account of

Jacob's life and his own spiritual journey. He recalls the longing for relief from persecution among the Jews of Poland-Lithuania that supported belief in the messianic visions of Sabbatai Tzvi.

At the age of 16, Nahman became the student of a great religious teacher, the Baal Shem Tov (abbreviated as Besht) who teaches in Międzybóż (Medzhybizh). Nahman devotes himself to this strand of Jewish mysticism, and forms a bond with his teacher Mordechai, Reb Mordke. After his father's death, Nahman returns to Busk, where he became the local Rabbi. He fathers a son with Leah, and has mystical visions of the artificial world of appearances and the deeper world. These visions convince him that "suffering is the true substance of the world" (p. 854).

Later Nahman reunites with Mordechai who has strayed from the orthodox teachings of the Besht. He has come to believe in the Messianism of Sabbatai Tzvi, and that "The Messiah will be internally good, but he will be clothed in evil" (p. 851). Both Mordechai and Nahman are psychologically and religiously prepared to become believers in Jacob Frank.

> "The Messiah will come quietly when the world is submerged in the greatest darkness and the greatest misery, in evil and in suffering. He will be treated like a criminal. So the prophets have foretold."
>
> *The Books of Jacob*, p. 850

The Book of Sand introduces Jewish mysticism and messianic traditions, including major teachers, such as Ba'al Shem Tov, and heretics, such as Sabbatai Tzvi and Jacob Frank.

Kabbalah is a tradition of esoteric Jewish Mysticism. Believers perceive a hidden, spiritual world that lies beyond the physical world. This hermetic world can be accessed through meditation and study. The term *Kabbalah* is derived from the Hebrew root "k-b-l" which means "to receive." The term implies that Kabbalah is a way of receiving information from a hidden spiritual realm.

In her “Note on Sources” Tokarczuk refers to the “foundational reading that then organized all other study of subjects connected to Judaism was of course Gershom Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism”* (p. 6). You may want to read Scholem for deep understanding of Jewish mysticism and messianic traditions. If you have an hour, you can listen to Gershom Scholem himself deliver a lecture, “What is Jewish Mysticism?”

For paid subscribers below I have some more notes to enrich your Slow Read.

- **chat question** - about Jewish Mysticism.
- **character**, **Nahman** - another minor historical figure who Tokarczuk reinvents as a major fictional character
- **context** - the founder of Hasidic Judaism, Israel Ba’al Shem Tov (BeSh’T) who also appears as a character in *The Books of Jacob*

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Chat question

Most of the little I know about Jewish mysticism I have learned by reading *The Books of Jacob*, and by following my curiosity to the clues that Tokarczuk leaves. It is a rich, esoteric tradition that has many followers today, including for a time at least Madonna. At the end of chapter five, Nahman writes in his "Scraps",

> "It was the treatise *VaAvo haYom el HaAyin*, or *And I Came this Day unto the Fountain*, written by Eibeschütz, my Reb Mordke's master. And I felt then that I had become the next link in a long chain of the initiated that extends across the generations, that begins further back than, Sabbatai, than Abulafia, than Simon bar Yochia, than, than . . . and on, all the way to the dawn of time" (p. 849)

I will keep learning about these traditions through Scholem, Tokarczuk and others, including you fellow slow readers.

What do you know of Jewish mysticism and religious practice that you would like to share with other slow readers?

You can respond to this chat question directly in the comments section.

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I look forward to reading your experiences, insights, and perspectives.

Character - Nahman

Nahman Samuel ben Levi of Busk is the principal character of chapter five of *The Books of Jacob*. Again, he is a real historical person, identified in this entry from *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (1905)

with the daughter of the wealthy resh galuta enabled him to live in luxury and to entertain scholars and strangers lavishly. Thus R. Isaac of Palestine, who visited Babylon, stayed at Naḥman's house and enjoyed his hospitality. When the guest on leaving was asked by his host to bless him, the former answered with the beautiful parable of the tree which sheltered the weary traveler beneath its shade and fed him with its fruit, so that the grateful wanderer blessed it with the words, "May thy scions be like unto thee." "And I," added R. Isaac, "can bless thee, who art blessed with material and spiritual wealth, only with the prayer that thy scions too may be like unto thee" (Ta'an. 5b–6a). R. Naḥman had such a sense of his own worth that he said: "If some one now living were to become the Messiah, he must resemble me" (Sanh. 98b). He also permitted himself, in his capacity of justice, to decide civil cases without consulting his colleagues (*ib.* 5a). He was likewise the author of the important ruling that a defendant who absolutely denies his guilt must take the so-called rabbinical oath "shebu'at hesset" (Shebu. 40b). As a haggadist, Naḥman was less important, although he is said to have used many collections of haggadot (Ber. 23b). He was fond of collecting in one passage a number of Aramaic aphorisms (see Yoma 28b–29a), and used sturdy popular expressions in his speech (Ḥul. 12a, 172a; Ta'an. 24a). His haggadic remarks relating to Biblical personages were likewise made in this style, as the following specimens will show: "It is not seemly for women to be conceited; the two prophetesses Deborah and Huldah had hateful names, namely, 'bee' and 'weasel'" (Meg. 14b). "Shamelessness avails even in the face of Heaven; for God allowed Balaam to make the journey to Balak after He had forbidden it" (Sanh. 105a).

Bibliography: Hamagid, *B. B. T.* ii. 819 *et seq.*; Bacher, *Ag. Bab. Amor.* pp. 79–83; *Seder ha-Dorot*, pp. [illegible]

W. B. J. Z. L.

NAḤMAN B. SAMUEL HA-LEVI: Frankist; rabbi of Busk, Galicia; lived in the first part of the eighteenth century. When Mikulski, the administrator of the archbishopric of Lemberg, invited the representatives of Judaism to a disputation with the Frankists July 16, 1759, Naḥman was one of the Frankist delegates. On his baptism into the Christian faith he took the name of **Piotr Jacobski.**

Bibliography: Grätz, *Gesch. der Juden*, x. 382.

E. C. S. O.

NAḤMAN B. SIMḤAH OF BRATZLAV: Founder of the Ḥasidic sect known as "Bratzlaver Ḥasidim"; born at Miedzyboz (Medzhibozh), Podolia, Oct. 9, 1770; died at Uman 1811. His father was a grandson of Ba'al Shem-Ṭob and of R. Naḥman Horodenker. Naḥman b. Simḥah received his early education in Talmud, Cabala, and philosophy from his father. In his youth he led an ascetic life; and he is said to have followed it so rigorously as to swallow his food without masticating it in order that he might not enjoy it ("Maggid Siḥot," p. 8), and to roll naked in the snow (*ib.* p. 13). In 1798 he went to Palestine, where he was received with honor by the Ḥasidim, and where his influence brought about a reconciliation between the Lithuanian and the Volhynian Ḥasidim (*ib.* p. 30). Returning to Poland, he settled in Bratzlav, from which town he disseminated his teachings.

Naḥman was an independent and ardent thinker, as is discernible from his precepts as well as from his relation to the other Ẓaddiḳim of his time. His most important changes in the precepts and his reforms of the practises of Ḥasidism were the following: (1) he emphasized the importance of the ẓaddiḳ as a medium of communication between man and God, and as a sort of father confessor ("Liḳḳuṭe 'Eẓot," i., *s.v.* "Ẓaddiḳ" and "Teshubah"); (2) he laid stress on fasting and self-castigation as the most effective means of repentance (*ib.* ii., *s.v.* "Teshubah"); and (3) he held that the evil inclinations of man ("yeẓer ha-ra'") are necessary to the perfection of man and to his devotion to God ("Ḳorot Podolia," p. 33). Naḥman frequently recited extemporaneous prayers ("Maggid Siḥot," p. 6).

By his reforms and teachings Naḥman gained a great following among the Ḥasidim; but, unduly estimating the importance of his own mission, he assumed an attitude of superiority toward the Ẓaddiḳim of his time, and thus evoked much opposition from them. The Ẓaddiḳim, with "the Old Man of Shpola" at their head, waged war against Naḥman. They accused him of being a follower of Shabbethai Ẓebi and a Frankist, and persecuted and excommunicated his adherents. Although the number of the latter was rapidly increasing, Naḥman was compelled, on account of this opposition, to remove to Uman, where he lived for the rest of his life.

Naḥman's doctrines were published and disseminated mainly after his death, by his disciple Nathan ben Naphtali Herz of Nemirow. The latter built at Uman a synagogue in honor of his teacher, and composed a number of prayers to be recited at Naḥman's grave by his followers. Many of the latter flock there annually even to this day.

Nathan also arranged and published Naḥman's works, as follows: "Liḳḳuṭe Maharan" (vol. i., Ostrog, 1808; vol. ii., Moghilef, 1811; vol. iii., Ostrog, 1815), Ḥasidic interpretations of the Scriptures, the Midrashim, etc.; "Sefer ha-Middot" (Moghilef, 1821), treatises on morals, arranged alphabetically; "Alfa Beta" (*ib.* n.d.); "Sippure Ma'asiyyot" (n. p., 1815), fantastic tales in Hebrew and Yiddish; "Ma'gele Ẓedeḳ" (Jozefov, 1847), on good conduct. These works may be best described as a conglomeration of nonsense, philosophic truths, poetry, and masterful pictures of the life and customs of Naḥman's time. See Ḥasidim.

Bibliography: Litinsky, *Ḳorot Podolia*, i. 32 *et seq.*, Odessa, 1895; Deinard, *Le-Ḳorot Yisrael be-Russia*, pp. 6 *et seq.*, in *Ner ha-Ma'arabi*, 1896, Nos. 9–10.

H. R. A. S. W.

NAḤMANI, SAMSON ḤAYYIM BEN NAḤMAN RAPHAEL: Italian Talmudist; flourished about the latter half of the eighteenth century. He was the pupil of Ephraim Cohen of Ostrog, rabbi of Modena; of Abi'ad Sar-Shalom Basilla, rabbi of Mantua; and, in Cabala, of Benjamin Alexander ha-Kohen, rabbi of Reggio. He wrote "Toledot Shimshon," a commentary on Mishnah Abot (Leghorn, 1766), and "Zera' Shimshon," on the Pentateuch and the Five Megillot (Mantua, 1778).

Bibliography: Fürst, *Bibl. Jud.* iii. 8.

E. C. J. S. R.

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There is a minor spoiler in this entry, but we do know that Jacob Frank will convert to Christianity in 1759.

Nahman will appear in the narration of others, and through his own voice as written down in his memoir, “Scraps”. It is one of the books within *The Books of Jacob*. This invented memoir will appear throughout the novel, and towards the end of the book Tokarczuk presents a plausible story of the how the manuscript was saved from destruction (or the burning archive).

Nahman writes his Scraps instead of his more devout work of a hagiography of Sabbatai Tzvi.

> He calls those notes “scraps,” for they are what remains after other, more important work. Crumbs—such is the stuff of life. His writing on the lid of the case set up on his lap, in the dust and discomfort of travel, is in essence tikkun, the repair of the world, mending the holes in its fabric so filled with overlapping patterns, squiggles, tangles, trails. This is how to view this strange pursuit of Nahman’s. Some

> people heal others, some build homes, others study books and rearrange the words in them to find the proper meaning, Nahman writes. (p. 868)

Nahman's "Scraps" provides one of the deepest insights into the psychology of Jacob's followers and of Jewish mysticism.

Context - Israel Ba'al Shem Tov & Hasidic Judaism

Nahman's teacher is Israel Ba'al Shem Tov - abbreviated as BeSh'T. It was not till my second reading of the novel that I really understood the importance of BeSh'T.

Israel Ba'al Shem Tov (1698–1760) was the founder of Hasidism, the most important spiritual movement in Judaism of the period. He was born Yisra'el ben Eli'ezer. In 1734, Rabbi Yisra'el revealed himself to the world as a holy man. He became known as the *Baal Shem Tov*, Master of the

Good Name. This title was made into the acronym of "BeSh'T (Besht)." Later he moved to Międzybóż (in modern Ukrainian, Medzhybizh) in Western Ukraine, where he lived for the rest of his life.

The Baal Shem Tov's teachings were based upon the Kabalistic teachings of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (1534-72) but made more accessible. He emphasized the importance and significance of prayer, love of God, and love of one's fellow Jews. People other than Torah scholars could reach great spiritual heights through these channels.

His teachings revolutionized the Jewish world. We will learn later in the novel how the Besht himself responded to the heresies of his student Nahman and Jacob Frank.

You can read more about the Besht in this online encyclopedia entry.

One fun fact - two commonly used images of the Besht are in fact portraits of later Jewish rabbis with similar names! There are no images of the real Besht.

You may know more about his teachings and significance in Jewish culture. Do let me and other slow readers know if you do.

Chapter 6

Books of Jacob | II. Book of Sand, Chapter 6

"All prophets must come from elsewhere"

> This makes sense: prophets never come from within. All prophets must come from elsewhere, must suddenly appear, seem strange, out of the ordinary....
>
> And yet a prophet must also be one of our own."
>
> Tokarczuk, *Books of Jacob,* p. 843

In Chapter 6, we finally meet Jacob. Nahman hears first from Elisha and Hayah Shorr that Jacob Leybowicz (whose surname will change later in the novel to Frank) is the Messiah. Nahman travels to meet Jacob in Smyrna (current day, Izmir), where previously Sabbatai Tzvi revealed himself to be the Messiah. Nahman finds what he is looking for: he sees a prophet in the strange wedding guest in white sandals.

The story then returns to Rohatyn where there is a brief outbreak of violence between the divided Jewish community. The Shorr family shelter a gentile runaway peasant, but the more orthodox members of the community resent this "golem". Nahman visits Yente who sees through her fourth-person narrator eyes the story of Jacob's childhood. Yente is Jacob's grandmother. She sees in her memory vision the young Jacob running away from home after being beaten by his father (Yente's son). He retreats to a cave near Korólowka. There he has a charismatic transformation: "'I was born in this cave, he proclaims." (p. 818)

This cave becomes a principal place in the story. Meanwhile Hayah and Isaac Shorr realise that my swallowing the amulet Yente has entered a state of "dying and not dying". Yente's great-granddaughter, Pesel takes responsibility for her, transferring her on a cart to Podhajce. There Pesel recalls a story of a goat that reveals the manifestation of the Messiah in Smyrna.

Father Chmielowski resumes his correspondence with Drużbacka about his new encyclopedia.

A lot happens in this chapter. Savour it. At the core of the chapter is a question: who is this strange guest, Jacob?

For paid subscribers below I have two more curated clips from this interview of Olga Tokarczuk responding to Julia Fiedorczuk's question. I also share some excerpts from the main history of Jacob Frank and the Frankists to enrich your Slow Read.

- **chat question** - about prophets, gurus and Messiahs.
- **character**, **Jacob** - What fascinated Olga Tokarczuk about Jacob Frank?
- **context** - How Jacob and his followers rose from obscurity and poverty to make a different kind of society?

If you have not already done so, please upgrade your subscription, and read on to get more from your Slow Read of *The Books of Jacob.*

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Chat question

> The Messiah is our doppelgänger, a more perfect version of ourselves—he is what we would be, had it not been for the fall"

Reb Mordke, *Books of Jacob*, p. 829

QUESTION

What leads people to believe in prophets and Messiahs like Jacob Frank?

You can respond to this chat question directly in the comments section.

I will also post a chat thread for paid subscribers in which you can share your response, your questions, highlighted passages, or indeed anything you would like to share about reading *The Books of Jacob* this week.

I look forward to reading your experiences, insights, and perspectives.

Character - Jacob

This week I will write less and let Olga Tokarczuk do the talking about the character of Jacob Frank. She speaks in Polish but the auto translate is easy to follow.

By the way, the interview is conducted in Proza, the club of Wrocław Literature House near Olga Tokarczuk's home. She has established a major literary festival in this region.

In this clip Olga Tokarczuk explains that what fascinated her about Jacob Frank was how his story was suppressed - by everybody!

Pawel Maciejko, *The mixed multitude : Jacob Frank and the Frankist movement, 1755-1816 (2011)* is the history that Tokarczuks refers to in her 'Note on Sources.' Maciejko summarises here (p. 12) the story of Jacob's beginnings, which we glimpse in chapter six through Yente's vision.

Frank's Beginnings

According to the Frankist chronicle, *Pan* ("the Lord"), Ya'akov ben Leyb, later known as Jacob Frank, was born in 1726 in Berczanie, a small village in Podolia.[70] Other sources give other Podolian locations, Korolowka[71] or Buczacz,[72] as the place of his birth. The family had strong Sabbatian connections: his father, Leyb Buchbinder, was a brother of Moses Meir Kamenker, the Sabbatian emissary detained in Mannheim while distributing *Va-avo ha-yom el ha-ayyin* (Kamenker was a brother-in-law of Fishel of Złoczów);[73] Jacob Frank's mother, Rachel Hirschl of Rzeszów, was a sister of Löbl, father of Schöndl Dobruschka, the *spiritus movens* of Sabbatianism in Moravia.[74] When Frank was only a few months old, his family left Poland and moved to the Ottoman Empire; it is likely that the move was connected to the affair that erupted after the detention of his uncle Moses Meir Kamenker a year earlier.

Young Jacob grew up in the Danubian principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, spending extended periods in the Ottoman territories proper; he lived in Czernowitz, Smyrna, Bucharest, Sofia, and Constantinople. At some point during his stay in Turkey, he acquired the nickname "Frank" or "Frenk."

Context - the Frankist Movement

In the next clip Olga Tokarczuk discusses how she was intrigued about the way in which Jacob and his followers experienced social mobility upwards through Eastern European society. They rose from being poor, minor merchants and trades workers to become, in Jacob's case a noble in a castle. It was, Tokarczuk says a kind a "pre-revolution" that preceded the French Revolution.

As I read, *The Books of Jacob* I kept wondering about the question, what makes people believe in a Messiah, a prophet, a guru, or the leader of a movement, despite that person's strangeness and many visible faults? The book explores that question, not just the character of Ya'akov ben Leyb who became Jacob Frank. It was his followers who made the strange guest into a Messiah through their belief, their stories, their hopes and their fears.

That "mixed multitude" to use Pawel Maciejko's phrase is a mercurial and mysterious as Jacob Frank himself. Here is how Maciejko summarised (p. 20) the central historical question of his book.

Such contrasting accounts of Frank are many. He was an Ashkenazi among the Sephardim, a Sephardi among the Ashkenazim, a Pole among the Turks, a Turk among the Poles, an unlearned boor among the sages, a sage among the simpletons, a believer among skeptics, a libertine among the pious. Following his conversion in 1759, he continued to be seen as a Jew among the Christians and yet was considered a Christian among the Jews. Heinrich Graetz, the first monographer of Frankism, characterized the founder of the movement as "one of the worst, slyest, and most deceitful villains of the eighteenth century."[123] A Polish Catholic encyclopedia defined him as "the greatest reformer of Polish Jewry."[124] Aleksander Kraushar called Frank's dicta a "theosophical system arisen in a head of a boor, a teaching lacking any theological background, in which shreds of Christian dogmas are associated in a disorderly manner with concepts from the Zohar, with traces of occultist tenets, and with chaos of incomprehensible tones."[125] Gershom Scholem claimed that they "contained a genuine creed of life."[126] In short, Frank was the most mercurial of all Jewish leaders. In this work, I seek to penetrate his mercuriality and uncover the facts of his astonishing career.

I hope that both informs and intrigues you as we read slowly this wonderful chapter this week,

Chapter 7

Books of Jacob | II. Book of Sand, Chapter 7

"As the world gives birth to the Messiah, it must suffer, and all laws must break"

> They came to the conclusion that the misfortunes of the preceding years had been blessings in disguise, for they made a kind of sense, foretelling the coming of the saviour, just as painful contractions foretell the birth of a new person. As the world gives birth to the Messiah, it must suffer, and all laws must break, conventions be eradicated, oaths and promises crumble."
>
> Tokarczuk, *Books of Jacob,* p. 804

Chapter 7 begins with Yente's story. Through her father, Yente is connected to the Jewish heretic Messiah, **Sabbatai Tzvi** (1626-1676), who prefigures Jacob Frank. Through her grandparents, Yente is connected to the Cossack-led **Khmelnytsky Uprising** (1648-1657), Through a Cossack act of sexual violence, this history of hateful violence is handed down to

Jacob Frank. Jacob's father was conceived in the open field in which a passing Cossack or Ukrainian soldier raped Yente.

The Khmelnytsky Uprising was the cause of the massacres and "slaughters that spread from country to country, and with them came the refugees, the widows and the agunot, the orphaned children, the crippled - all irrefutable proof that the end was on its way and the world would soon give birth to the Messiah" (pp. 808-807). The Cossack Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky (1595-1657) led this uprising in which Cossacks, Crimean Tatars and Orthodox Ukrainian peasantry fought against the Polish Catholic Szlachta.

This event is interpreted the histories of Poland, Ukraine, Russia, and the Jewish people of Eastern Europe. It was an outbreak of communal violence in which 15,000 to 30,000 plus Jews were killed. The Uprising is celebrated in nationalist Ukrainian histories as an early act of national independence against Polish colonists. However, in 1654 Khmelnytsky and his band swore allegiance to the Russian Tsar, thereby incorporating eastern Ukraine into Russia by the 1654 Pereiaslav Agreement. This

agreement was the historical document that Vladimir Putin gave to Tucker Carlson in his interview in February 2024, which I discussed in this post:

3 Russian history lessons from the Tucker Putin interview

Jeff Rich

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February 14, 2024

The Tucker Carlson interview with Vladimir Putin surprised many. Tucker Carlson clearly was not expecting a Russian history lesson. Yet the talk show host and hundreds of millions of people around the world received a history lesson, delivered by a world leader.

Read full story

The Khmelnytsky Massacres are crucial to Yente's story and *The Books of Jacob*. They instigated internal conflicts in Poland-Lithuania and external wars that sapped Polish power over the next century and laid the groundwork for the dissolution of the Commonwealth. The period is known as the Deluge and the Ruin, and was mythologised in nationalist Polish historical fiction, with the anti-Jewish violence airbrushed out, by the 1905 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Henryk Sienkiewicz. Olga Tokarczuk offers a different vision of the same history. Her *Books of Jacob* has been described as an 'anti-Sienkiewicz.'

Painting "Entrance of Bohdan Khmelnytskyi to Kiev in 1649" by Mykola Ivasyuk in the 19th century

The atrocities and violence were not limited to the Jews but were a catastrophe for the Jewish people of Europe. It convinced many Jews that the Messiah must arrive imminently, and, as Yente's father believed, it was time to "bear witness to these final days". Sabbatai Tzvi was that promised Messiah, and chapter 7 introduces us to his extraordinary story. His appearance prefigures Jacob's story because under this heretic Messiah "all laws must break, conventions be eradicated, oaths and promises crumble."

For paid subscribers below I have some additional sources and notes to enrich your Slow Read.

- **chat question** - on the role of heresy in *The Books of Jacob*.
- **character**, **Yente** -
- **context** - on Sabbatai Tzvi and Sabbateanism.

If you have not already done so, please upgrade your subscription, and read on to get more from your Slow Read of *The Books of Jacob.*

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Chat question

> The heterodox mind is restless and searching, it is brave and eager to experiment. Heterodoxy proves the existence of a healthy spirit, a basic metaphysical intelligence that may be granted to simple, not necessarily educated people. But heresy appears only where faith is genuinely strong, where it's taken seriously and experienced deeply on an everyday basis. That's why I would say contrarily that any religion that has to grapple with religious heterodoxy is fortunate. Grapple, which doesn't mean the same as to fight and destroy.

> Rooting out heresy is like cutting oneself off from the sources of one's own strength and shifting into neutral gear. It's like paving over a reservoir of fresh water and only drinking water that circulates within a closed system. In Poland, I have always felt a lack of good, solid heresy, so the unexpected appearance of Jacob Frank and his understanding of the Virgin Mary of Jasna Góra as the incarnation of Shekhinah put me in a state of readiness to write."
>
> Olga Tokarczuk, How I Wrote *The Books of Jacob*

QUESTION

How do heresy and heterodox beliefs drive history forward and renew conventional ideas?

You can respond to this chat question directly in the comments section.

I will also post a chat thread for paid subscribers in which you can share your response, your questions, highlighted passages, or indeed anything you would like to share about reading *The Books of Jacob* this week.

I look forward to reading your experiences, insights, and perspectives.

Character - Yente

In this chapter Yente is revealed to us not only as a obscure, angelic fourth person narrator, but as a character. Her character indeed carries the heritage and blood lines of Jewish traditions, Sabbatean heresies and Cossack violence.

Two brief passages stood out to me. The first reveals her story in her name; “Her father named her Yente, which means: she who spreads the news, and she who teaches others.”

The second comes in Mayer commentary on the Shekhinah, which is a Hebrew word meaning "dwelling" or "presence," used to describe God's

presence in the world, and in heretical and reform traditions, such as practised by Sabbatai Tzvi, represents the feminine attributes of God, such as caring and loving.

Virgin Mary of Jasna Góra that Jacob Frank will view as the incarnation of Shekhinah

Context - Sabbatai Tzvi and Sabbateanism

Sabbatai Tzvi (1626-1676) is an intriguing character, who I discovered by reading this novel. You can read the full text of the 1906 Jewish encyclopaedia on Tzvi (there are a number of variant spellings) here. Simon Schama also discusses him in *Belonging: The Story of the Jews 1492-1900.*(he uses the spelling Shabbetai Zevi)

Tzvi's story was told in his lifetime by his follower Nathan of Gaza, who in ways prefigures the character of Nahman, just as Tzvi prefigures Jacob. Indeed, Simon Schama writes:

> It was Nathan who turned the man into the Messiah; Nathan who had the gift of ecstatic promotion and mythic invention. Before Shabbetai was properly launched in the world, Nathan claimed to have 'discovered' an ancient apocalypse text which, centuries earlier, had

> prophesied the coming of Shabbetai Zevi the redeemer. Needless to say he had written this himself with considerable help from the delirious verses of Solomon Molkho [a Portuguese Jewish mystic and messiah claimant 1500-1532] and had gone so far as to distress its surface to give the appearance of antiquity.
>
> Schama, *Belonging, pp.* 238-239

Tzvi remains a controversial figure because of his heresy and late conversion of Islam. Gershom Scholem connected the Kabbalah, Sabbateanism and later Enlightenment Jewish thought as part of a tradition. He believed the mysticism of the Kabbalah prepared the ground for the law-breaking of the Sabbateans, including those in Podolia who would become Jacob's followers. Reading between the lines, Schama is sceptical of the visions, but understanding of the yearning.

> Shabbetai appealed to immense multitudes of Jews on who the higher cosmology and complicated symbolism of Kabbalah was completely

> lost. In large part his adherents were still synagogue Jews for whom *halakhic* legalism was all very well day by day, Sabbath by Sabbath, but which somehow failed their sense of the fatefulness of Jewish life and memory. The Messiah filled the vacuum.
>
> Schama, *Belonging,* p.241

But Schama does connect, as Tokarczuk does, the yearning to believe in the Messiah with the traumas of the Khmelnytsky Massacres.

> Looming over everything was the atrocious experience of the mass slaughters of 1649 in Poland and Ukraine. It is true that some of the most intense centres of Shabbetean hysteria were also some of the safest cities in Europe for Jews - Amsterdam, Hamburg, Venice and Salonika - but those were the paces to which traumatised and destitute survivors had come with nothing but a pack of nightmares. (It is estimated that almost 90 per cent of Poland's and Ukraine's Jews were

either killed or forced into flight in these years.) Shabbetai's Sarah was one of these walking wounded, badly in need of an avenging Messiah.

Schama, *Belonging,* p.241

Rembrandt, Portrait of a Young Jew, painted in 1648 in the wake of the Khmelnytsky Massacres

Pawel Maciejko who wrote the book on the Frankists is actually writing a biography of Sabbatai Tzvi, and he discusses his story, his heresy and

his influence on Judaism and Enlightenment in this one-hour video on YouTube. It can be a bit of a dense, insider discussion at times; but if you are curious, check it out.

A bit of a longer post this week, with extra quotations.

Enjoy your slow read

SIDE NOTE:-

3 Russian history lessons from the Tucker Putin interview

and what we learned about NATO and Ukraine

Feb 14, 2024

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Share

The Tucker Carlson interview with Vladimir Putin surprised many. Tucker Carlson clearly was not expecting a Russian history lesson. Yet the talk show host and hundreds of millions of people around the world received a history lesson, delivered by a world leader.

Reportedly the interview is the most watched interview in recorded history. There have been over 200 million English-language viewers, and when all languages, including Chinese and Hindi, are counted the audience is estimated at over 1 billion viewers.

Putin challenged Tucker Carlson to have a serious conversation, and not engage in the usual media gotcha journalism, where the journalist-host of the talk show becomes the centre of attention, not the guest, who, in this case, has been a leading participant in major world events for the last 25 years. So the history lessons of such a guest should be of interest, yes?

And the history presented by such a participant in world events should also be questioned, tested and yet also understood. I have tried to do both over the last few days since watching the interview on Friday, and have summarised the three history lessons on Russia and Ukraine that we can learn from the Tucker Putin interview.

I will be writing more on those lessons soon, and if you are a paid subscriber you can watch my 15 minute video setting out my first views, and follow the links to books and free resources with which you can explore and test Putin's history lessons.

Burning Archive is a reader-supported publication. To receive new posts and support my work, consider becoming a free or paid subscriber.

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I have deferred my next essay on tides of globalisation (for paid subscribers) to next week, so I can share with you this exclusive discussion of the "interview that broke the internet."

My next post for free subscribers will come out on Saturday morning.

My video on the three history lessons on Russia and Ukraine that we learned from the Tucker Carlson interview with the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, is here.

In the video, I refer to some books that you can read to make up your own mind about the balance of truth and distortions on the history of Russia and Ukraine that you find in the Tucker Putin interview, in my writing, and in the Western legacy media.

These books are:

- M.S. Grigoriev and others *History of Ukraine: Monograph* (2023) [free pdf]
- Serhii Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom: A History of Russian Nationalism from Ivan the Great to Vladimir Putin* (2017)
- Mark B Smith, *The Russia Anxiety. And How History Can Resolve It* (2020)
- Maureeen Perrie (ed), *The Cambridge History of Russia: Volume 1, From Early Rus' to 1689* (2015)

I have also done a series of podcasts on the history of Russia, starting with *65. The Black Legend of Russian History* (August 2022)

The episode on the real history of Russia and Ukraine in Kievan Rus is also available with some illustrations on YouTube here.

My essay on tides of globalization in the nineteenth century will be coming next Wednesday. Sorry about the last minute delay, but I had to make arrangements for a medical procedure on that day.

Thanks and take care all

Comments

My Understanding of Chapter 7

This chapter unfolds in an atmosphere of decay and betrayal:

• Khmelnytsky's massacres (often considered a precursor to the Holocaust) provide the historical backdrop (1648, p. 806).

• "The machinery of the world is breaking down... One night in the mill where Yente's father delivered grain, the milling wheels came apart, every last one" (p. 808).

• The Messiah commits apostasy, converting to Islam to save his life, but the travelling Lwów delegation only learns of this after returning home (p. 801).

Yet, there is a strong sense of repetition and cyclical history:

• Yente's father was expelled from Poland to Regensburg, then expelled from Regensburg, only to return to Greater Poland in Lwów (p. 807).

• Memory fragments "as happens with remembered images—got divided up into words and then reconstituted from these words inside the minds of his children" (p. 801), resembling a game of "Chinese whispers."

• The theme of rebirth is suggested with "the birth pains had already begun" (p. 807).

• "Mayer the Skeptic's" wound is passed down through generations: "...he passed that wound along to his children, and, later, his grandchildren" (p. 801). This evokes the idea of psychic inheritance.

In all this, I wonder—could Yente be becoming a dybbuk? A disembodied spirit, often depicted as the wandering soul of a deceased person, seeking refuge in a living body.

Chapter Question: How do heresy and heterodox beliefs drive history forward and renew conventional ideas?

If heresy is a belief or opinion contrary to orthodox religions and heterodoxy is deviation from accepted standards or beliefs, I'm not sure that either, on their own, necessarily propel history forward. Rather, people may be drawn to them out of a passive search for hope. As followers, they often accept what is happening without actively shaping events. When the

leader disappears, things tend to revert to their previous state or are reinterpreted to fit existing narratives—creating the illusion of a repeating cycle rather than genuine renewal.

Like (1)

Reply (1)

Share

Jeff Rich

Apr 1

Author

Thanks for those great notes. I think you might be right about the dybbuk! That is a great point about people the cycle of passivity-hope-disappointment. I suspect there is a lot of that going around in the USA at the moment with the latest false Messiah!

Chapter 8

Books of Jacob | II. Book of Sand, Chapter 8

"He chose freedom in his heart, rather than freedom in the world"

> “I [Nahman] wrote down those words with a joyous sense of satisfaction. That was how to understand Sabbatai’s actions. He chose freedom in his heart, rather than freedom in the world. He had converted to Islam in order to be faithful to his mission of salvation.”
>
> Tokarczuk, *Books of Jacob,* p. 788

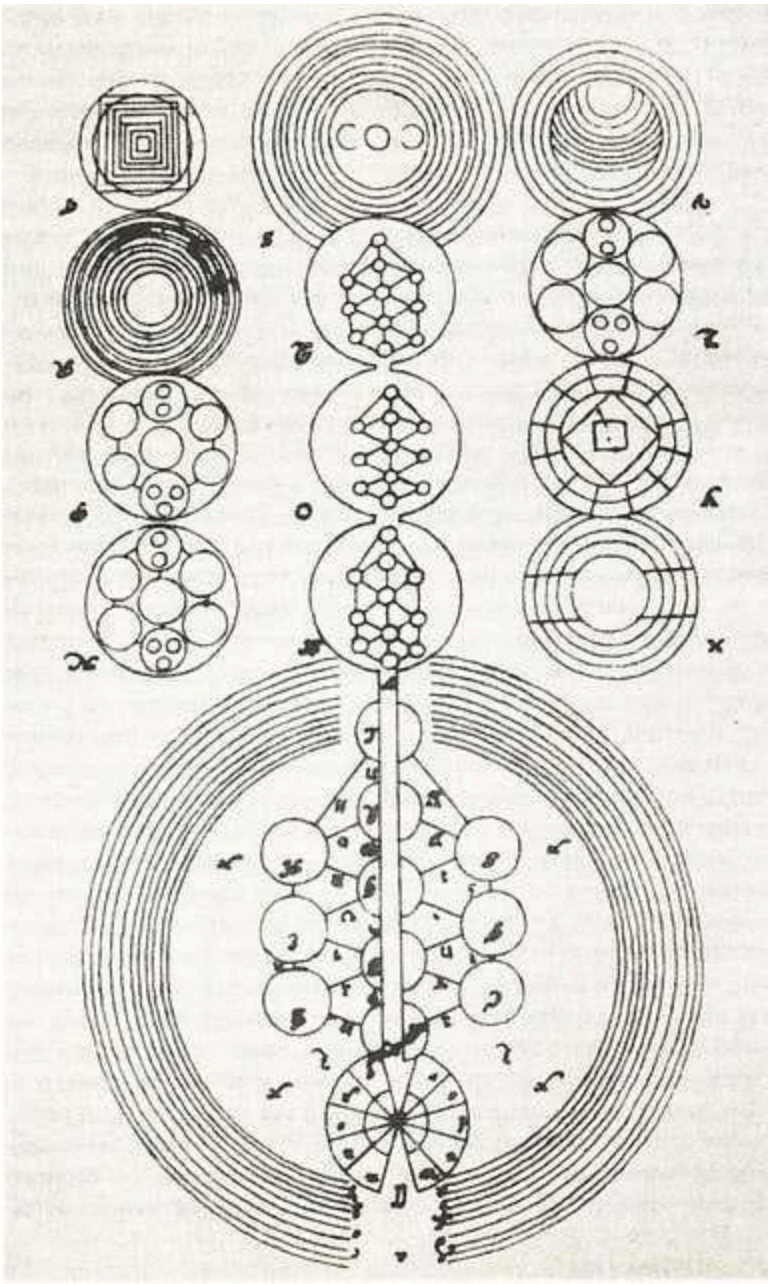
Chapter 8 is brief and yet visually rich. Let my notes this week be similar.

First the summary.

In Smyrna (now Izmir, Türkiye), Nahman studies numerology, Kabbalah, and meditation techniques with his teacher Reb Mordke. He meets a Polish nobleman named Count Kossakowski who we will meet more fully in chapter 10. Nahman and Mordke also listen to a wise man named

Tovah, who carries the traditions of Sabbatai Tzvi. Eventually, Nahman and Mordechai propose that Jacob marry Tovah's daughter, Hana. At religious ceremony to celebrate the marriage, Jacob enters an ecstatic and ominous trance.

However, a picture tells a thousand words. Have you noticed the pictures inserted, without captions, throughout the novel. With the help of Google Lens you can identify these pictures and so discover more about the context of the novel. For example, on page 789 you find the sefirot diagram - the Kabbalistic tree of life.



Do follow your curiosity through the slow read. Explore the pictures and their sources.

I discovered during the week that *The Books of Jacob* was staged as a theatrical production at the National Theatre of Poland in Warsaw. The Theatre's website has a photograph gallery of scenes from the play. The 25 images can help you visualise the characters and scenes better than any words I can write. I have used an image that may represent Jacob's trance for this post Check them all out here.

For paid subscribers below I have some additional sources and notes to enrich your Slow Read.

- **chat question** - on Olga Tokarczuk's other writing.
- **character** - Reb Mordke and links to Gershom Scholem's account of his role in Jacob's story
- **context** - on the Tree of Life and Jewish Messianism, including links to the original source and story of the sefirot diagram from page 789.

If you have not already done so, please upgrade your subscription, and read on to get more from your Slow Read of *The Books of Jacob.*

Subscribed

Chat question

Readers may like to check out this interview in English with Olga Tokarczuk. It is mainly about her book, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, but also discusses William Blake, animal rights, and her approach to writing. Her persona shines.

QUESTION

Have you read or are you curious about other works by Olga Tokarczuk?

You can respond to this chat question directly in the comments section.

I will also post a chat thread for paid subscribers in which you can share your response, your questions, highlighted passages, or indeed anything you would like to share about reading *The Books of Jacob* or Olga Tokarczuk's other works this week.

I look forward to reading your experiences, insights, and perspectives.

Character - Reb Mordke

Reb Mordke's full name is Mordechai ben Elias Margalit.

We were introduced to Mordke in chapter 5, where he and Nahman followed the Besht, and Mordke taught Nahman in the school of Isohar of Podhacje (pp. 838-836). In chapter 8, Mordke also teaches Jacob, then more merchant than messiah. Mordke took the lead in persuading Tovah to marry his daughter to Jacob. He and Nahman are obstinate. Tovah calls them "those two from Poland." Will Hanah's father come to regret his decision?

Again, Reb Mordke is a real historical person. This brief section from Gershom Scholem's work on Shabbatai Tzvi highlights the role of the obstinate "two from Poland" in Jacob Frank's story.

Frank's accounts of his earliest associations with the Sabbateans are full of contradictions, but there is no doubt that these contacts go back to his youth. Apparently his teacher in Czernowitz belonged to the sect and had promised that Frank would be initiated into their faith after marriage, as was often customary among Shabbateans. He began to study the Zohar, making a name in Shabbatean circles as a man possessed of special powers and inspiration. When in 1752 he married Hannah, the daughter of a respected Ashkenazi merchant in Nikopol (Bulgaria), two Shabbatean emissaries from Podolia were at the wedding. Shabbatean scholars like these, some of whom Frank mentions in his stories, accompanied him on his travels, and initiated him into the mysteries of "the faith." There is no doubt that these men were representatives of the extremist wing formed by the disciples of Barukhyah Russo (d. 1720), one of the leaders of the Doenmeh in Salonika. It was in the company of these teachers, themselves Ashkenazim, that Frank visited Salonika for the first time in 1753, and became involved with the Barukhyah group of the Doenmeh, but he followed the practice of the Polish disciples and did not convert to

> Islam. After his marriage it seems that trading became secondary to his role as a Shabbatean "prophet," and as part of his mission he journeyed to the grave of Nathan of Gaza, Adrianople, and Smyrna, and again spent a good deal of time in Salonika in 1755.
>
> *Gershom Scholem on the Frankists*

Context - the Tree of Life and Messianism

In this chapter Tovah believes “The Messiah is in Salonika” (p. 785). But Tovah believes it is a man called Konio who has been inhabited by Sabbatai Tzvi’s spirit. Jacob, Nahman, and Mordke will conspire to prove him wrong.

Again, the theme of Messianism is strong. You can read Scholem, but this short article from the Jewish Virtual Library covers the basics of

Jewish Messianism. It emphasises the legacy of Tzvi and Frank's visions for modern reform Judaism, which influence Tokarczuk.

> In the modern world, Reform Judaism has long denied that there will be an individual messiah who will carry out the task of perfecting the world. Instead, the movement speaks of a future world in which human efforts, not a divinely sent messenger, will bring about a utopian age. The Reform idea has influenced many nonorthodox Jews: The oft-noted attraction of Jews to liberal and leftwing political causes probably represents a secular attempt to usher in a messianic age.

The sefirot diagram or Kabbalistic tree of life shown on page 789 was drawn by Christian Knorr von Resenroth (1636 – 1689), and published in his *Kabbala Denudata*, or 'Kabbalah Unveiled.' The meaning of the diagram and the remarkable story of that book are explained in this recent article from the *Jerusalem Post*.

Thanks for joining the slow read

Comments ch 8

My Understanding of Chapter 8

I can never quite tell if I'm commenting in the right place. I understand there's a section for paid subscribers—sometimes I can find it, other times I can't. Regardless, here's my take on Chapter 8:

It seems that Nahman suffers from anxiety and is desperate for the world to be orderly:

"In order not to give longing and anxiety access to his heart, he would relish this play until dawn with his eyes closed, creating out of words and letters completely new, new unlikely meanings and connections." (p.794)

Jacob has a rather strange accent, so instead, he responds in Turkish—fluently, as though suddenly finding himself on home turf. Nahman, by contrast, doesn't feel completely at home here. (p.792)

Nahman has been troubled by how to reconcile the sect leader Sabbatai's conversion to Islam. When Isohar (Jacob and Nahman's teacher) rationalizes the discrepancy away, Nahman feels great relief. (p.787, p.790)

Moliwda is an interesting character—worldly, curious about others and the wider world (p.790–791). This sharply contrasts with Nahman, who always looks inward to make sense of things. Moliwda spoke and read several languages and had knowledge of numerology.

At the end of Chapter 8, Jacob undergoes a rite of passage in a ritualized ceremony, facilitated by a herbal oil placed "over his forehead, so that Jacob's eyes got glassy and he grew quiet, docile." (p.784). This induces a state that causes him to collapse to the floor like a dying man in pursuit of a higher plane. However, the urine spilling onto the floor serves as a stark reminder that he is still only human.

Chat Question: I haven't read any of Olga Tokarczuk's books before this slow read, however I very much reading this book so I can see myself reading another one in the future.

Like (1)

Reply

Chapter 9

Books of Jacob | II. Book of Sand, Chapter 9

"But Hana did have a different kind of dowry - the prestige of her family"

> The necklace she received from her husband was so valuable that it was taken from her right away and locked up in a chest. But Hana did have a different kind of dowry—the prestige of her family, the resourcefulness of her brothers, the books written by her father, the ancestry of her mother, who descends from Portuguese Jews, and her own sleepy beauty, and her gentleness.
>
> (Tokarczuk, *Books of Jacob,* p. 780)

Subscribed

Chapter 9 begins with the wedding in Turnu near Nikopol of Hana and Jacob. The lavish feast threatens to bankrupt Hanah's father, Tovah.

Still, Tovah secures a job for Jacob in Craiova. Jacob goes there soon after the wedding leaving Hanah, her father and her brother Hayim

behind. In Craiova, Jacob clashes with Tovah's brother-in-law, who is a follower of Sabbatai Tzvi and his assumed successor, Baruchiah.

One of Abraham's employees, Hershel, succumbs to Jacob's charisma. Despite his recent marriage, Jacob has numerous affairs and in "an act of reversal, the opposite of the written law" sex with Hershel.

On returning to Hanah, Jacob wants to give her a precious pearl, but demands jewellers drill into the near sacred object They refuse, and he then tricks a jeweller into helping him.

When Jacob collects Hana from her father's house, Hershel falls in love with Hana. They form a fateful triangle.

Isaac Tirion's 1744 map of Turkish Europe shown in part on p 783 of *The Books of Jacob*

For paid subscribers below I have some additional sources and notes to enrich your Slow Read.

- **chat question** - on the cultural influence of the Ottoman Empire.
- **character** - Hannah and Tovah, daughter and father become key characters

- **context** - Ottoman and Muslim Europe - Nikopol, Craiova, Salonika were all multifaith cities of the Ottoman Empire.

If you have not already done so, please upgrade your subscription, and read on to get more from your Slow Read of *The Books of Jacob.*

Subscribed

Chat question

QUESTION

How has the Ottoman empire influenced what we think of as European culture?

You can respond to this chat question in the comments section.

I will also post a chat thread for paid subscribers.

I look forward to reading your experiences, insights, and perspectives.

Character - Hannah and Tovah

Tovah gives his daughter to Jacob with doubts and regrets. His love for his daughter and distrust of Jacob will return in the story.

Hanah is married young and comes from the blended Turkish culture of Eastern Europe.

> "As a married woman, Hana received a new outfit, worn in the Turkish fashion—sift sirwal, and over them a Turkish tunic embroidered in roses and decorated with precious stones, and also a beautiful cashmere scarf now tossed onto a balustrade, since it is very hot."
>
> (Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob*, p. 780)

Ultimately, Hana will move to the cold of Poland, and miss the warmth, colour and daily culture of Ottoman Europe. But at this point of the story is a young woman wanting to break away from her home, even though she loves her father. She years for the freedom and the gifts of the stranger, Jacob Frank.

She plays with the pearl hanging on its gold chain, Jacob's gift to her. Hanna has clearly had enough of her parents, must show off her wedded status, wants Jacob to herself, wants travel, wants a change."

(Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob*, p. 766)

She will get all those things but lose her warm home and gain much suffering.

Context - Ottoman and Muslim Europe

> The workshop of Abraham, Tovah's brother-in-law, is a veritable treasure trove; he trades all over Europe the things the Orient does best, which flow through Stamboul to the north in a colorful stream of all kinds of bright and shining merchandise, much vaunted at the courts of Budapest and Vienna, Kraków and Lwów."
>
> (Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob*, p 774)

The Books of Jacob is a fantastic journey through three faiths. We have met Christianity and Judaism. We saw hints of the third, Islam in the previous chapters. Sabbatai Tzvi converted to Islam. Indeed, Marc David Baier, *The Ottomans: Khans, Caesars and Caliphs* devotes an entire chapter to the story of how the followers of Sabbatai Tzvi almost brought down the Sultan.

Now we see the broader influence of both Islam and the Ottoman Empire Europe, especially its Eastern Other half. In the early seventeenth century there was something of an Ottoman Renaissance. Turkish goods and aesthetics spread across Europe. Marc David Baier writes:

> Increased trade, travel, peaceful relations, and the first dispatch of more Ottoman ambassadors to Christian Europe… led in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the phenomenon of *Turquerie*, in which goods such as paintings and tapestries were imported from the Ottoman Empire to Central and Western Europe, while literature such as plays, operas and novels were set against an Ottoman backdrop. (Baier, *The Ottomans,* p. 315)

It was not just a phenomenon of high culture. New fashions, furnishings and consumer goods cross the porous boundaries of Christian, Jewish and Muslim Europe. All three faiths exchanged goods and ideas across borders: tulips, coffee, sofas, 'ottomans', erotic practices, religious beliefs

and cuisine. Indeed, the Swedish national dish—Swedish meatballs, or *köttbullar*—is an adaptation of Turkish *köfte.*

This influence faded in the later eighteenth century, and Christian and nationalist Europe walled its mind against its Muslim cohabitants. Indeed, the idea of Eastern Europe as the bulwark of Europe, guarding its gates against the Muslim and Eurasian horde, grew tragically popular in Poland, Ukraine, Hungary and other states. Jacob Mikanowski, in *Goodbye Eastern Europe: An Initimate History of a Divided Land* comments

> But despite the protestations of nationalist historians, Eastern Europe was never just a rampart: it was also a gate. If Muslims and Christians fought there, they also met, mingled and rubbed off on each other… Traces of a centuries-long Muslim presence are visible in Poland, Romania, Lithuania, and Belarus.
>
> (Mikanowski, *Goodbye Eastern Europe,* p. 43)

Mikanowski fails to mention the larger case of Russia, but regrettably that is the way with American 'scholarship' these days. However, his image is a striking way to reimagine the world with history.

> Eastern Europe, then, is not so much the edge of Europe as an Islamic periphery, one of the many fringes of a Muslim belt that stretches from West Africa all the way to Southeast Asia.
>
> (Mikanowski, *Goodbye Eastern Europe,* p. 43)

Enjoy your slow read

Comments ch 9

Sandra

From Tin to Timeline: Exploring…Apr 11

Liked by Jeff Rich

I'm fascinated by the pearl motif in this chapter—are we seeing one pearl, or two? Hana receives a pearl necklace from Jacob when they marry (p.780), and earlier we're told there's an exceptionally expensive pearl in her uncle Abraham's shop, where Jacob is working (p.773). Later, Jacob goes in disguise across the river to obtain "the most precious pearl" (p.768), which he gives to Hana (p.766).

I can't help but wonder if he stole it. The egg scene (p.771)—where Jacob theatrically pulls an egg from someone's pocket and accuses them of theft—feels like a clue. He's a trickster, conjuring objects out of nowhere to manipulate reality. Eggs and pearls: both small, round, easily hidden, and easily transformed into symbols. In Jacob's hands, they blur the line between gift and illusion.

And for what it's worth, in traditional Polish wedding superstition, real pearls are said to doom a marriage, each one symbolizing future tears. A dark gift, if that's what it was.

Interestingly, eggs also carry symbolic weight in both Christian and Jewish Polish traditions—sometimes linked to fertility, sometimes mourning, but always tied to life's fragility—which makes Jacob's egg trick feel even more layered.

Like (3)

Reply

Share

2 replies by Jeff Rich and others

The gardener

The gardenerApr 9

Liked by Jeff Rich

In this chapter I feel a slight undercurrent of tension. It starts with the notion of the 'bad people' on the roads, Tovah borrowing money and worrying about financial failure,

Nahman's first thoughts about Hana, Hana and her twin brother together, the idea of being a guest and not bothering about day to day things and moves into Jacob pulling eggs out of pockets, accusing the person of being a thief. It mortifies people who end up having to laugh with him but feels uncomfortable and a little bit bullying. The age and power difference between Hershel and Jacob is also uncomfortable.

The description of the goods being traded is rich and shows the craftsmanship and wealth of the people trading and Tokarczuk does go to town on it, listing the items just as she did in describing the markets in the earlier chapters.

We see Jacob revelling in his foreignness but is also a draw for people already, willing to 'reverse' the laws and revel in his own pleasures. He isn't a particularly likeable character but Tokarczuk descibes well the bringing of this man to importance, possibly at Hana's expense in this chapter.

Chapter 10

Books of Jacob | II. Book of Sand, Chapter 10

"all of nature is taking part in this process of mourning those gods"

> In this moment, Antoni Kossakowski realizes that the plaintive rumble of the sea is a lament, and that all of nature is taking part in this process of mourning those gods of whom the world has been in such desperate need. There is no one here. God created the world, and the effort of doing so killed him. Kossakowski had come all the way here to understand this.
>
> (Tokarczuk, *Books of Jacob,* p. 761-760)

Where is the *here* to which Count Antoni Kossakowski wandered to discover the disenchantment of the world, or even the death of God a century before Nietzsche?

It is Mount Athos, an Orthodox Christian spiritual centre since 1054. Women and children are forbidden entry to this 'Holy Mountain'. Its influence has spread across the Other Europe of the East, including the

scenes of *The Books of Jacob* in Poland-Lithuania, Ukraine, Wallachia, Moldova, and Russia. But it is here that Count Antoni Kossakowski becomes a strange, pagan-Christian-Jewish unorthodox heretic.

A contemporary Orthodox procession on Mount Athos, Greece

In Chapter 10, Count Antoni Kossakowski—who will also be known through the novel as Moliwda—sails to Develiki, and basks in the warmth of Southern Europe, the home of classical Greek culture. He reflects, in this *Book of Sand*, on the sands of destiny:

> Here Destiny is still in effect, the Greek version of Fatum that sets people in motion, marking out their paths like little strings of sand that flow along a dune from top to bottom, creating arabesques and other figures of which the finest artist would hardly be ashamed, twisting, chimerical, exquisite. (p. 764)

He has jumbled thoughts on sin, religion, pagan gods, and a strange woman called Irena, who is probably Wallachian or Serbian. He revels in the Mediterranean heated earth and its herbs, and imagines "the Greek gods living here once, the very same ones he learned of at his uncle's house" (p. 761). These pagan thoughts lead him to desecrate the Holy Mountain, and to flee to Smyrna, where he meets Nahman.

He also falls in love with a Christian woman. One of many brief, destructive romances of escape in Moliwda's life. But this romance also brings him into contact with the abduction into slavery of Anna Popielawska, and the payment of a ransom to Ottoman people traffickers of the eighteenth century. Anna however betrays him.

Kossakowski broods on his disillusionment and remembers another romantic betrayal from his childhood.

> "The flight of his lover, the sea, and this memory from his childhood make Moliwda feel frighteningly lonely. His only relief will come, not too long from now, from the Wallachian Bogomils… And all this has happened because Moliwda is fully convinced by now that his life has reached its natural conclusion, and that there won't be any other world." (p. 756)

But the new life of the mysterious Moliwda has only just begun.

For paid subscribers below I have some additional sources and notes to enrich your Slow Read.

- **chat question** - on the Western memory of pagan antiquity
- **character** - on Antoni Kossakowski or Moliwda
- **context** - European enchantment with antiquity and Polish culture.

If you have not already done so, please upgrade your subscription, and read on to get more from your Slow Read of *The Books of Jacob.* And my voiceover of this post!

Subscribed

Chat question

> On these walks Kossakowski imagines the Greek gods living here once, the very same ones he learned of at his uncle's house. Now they return. They wear glimmering gold robes, have very light skin, are taller than people. Sometimes he almost thinks he's walking in their footsteps, that if he hurries he might still be able to catch up with the goddess Aphrodite, glimpse her magnificent nakedness; the scent of hyssop becomes for a moment the half-animal smell of a perspiring

> Lord. He exerts his imagination; through it he wants to see them, he needs them. The gods. God.
>
> Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob*, p. 761

QUESTION

How have visions of pagan antiquity - in the Mediterranean and elsewhere - shaped our modern culture?

You can respond to this chat question in the comments section.

I will also post a chat thread for paid subscribers.

I look forward to reading your experiences, insights, and perspectives.

Character - Antoni Kossakowski (Moliwda)

In her ‘Note on Sources’ Olga Tokarczuk explained that “Moliwda’s character owes much to Andrzej Żuławski and his book *Moliwda* (1994).”

Andrzej Żuławski (1940-2016) was a Polish arthouse film director, born in Lviv in current-day Ukraine. His oeuvre is another discovery for me of this slow read.

His *Moliwda* appears to be unavailable to English readers. But essays on the book show the connection to Tokarczuk’s story. *Moliwda* presents Antoni Kossakowski as a poet, intellectual and adventurer, who is drawn to Jacob Frank. Żuławski presents Moliwda as a “bitter witness to modernity.” Like Tokarczuk, he draws an analogy between the end of the 18th century and contemporary cultural crisis.

Antoni Kossakowski (maybe) by an unknown painter

Antoni Kossakowski was a historical person, although not widely covered in English language sources that I have searched. The following text is a translation from entry in an online Polish encyclopaedia on his life.

> **Antoni Kossakowski** (**Moliwda**) of the Ślepowron coat of arms (born October 12, 1718 in Samogitia , died December 28, 1786 in Warsaw), Polish poet, translator, religious polemicist.

At a young age he was placed in the chancellery of King Stanisław Leszczyński , and soon expelled for unspecified "licentiousness". He went abroad for 24 years, led an adventurous life, taking on various jobs. According to his own memoirs, he was, among others, a tutor in Moscow, a professor at the academy, an elder of the Bogomil sect in Wallachia, and even the ruler of one of the Greek islands, where he ruled under the name of *Molivdy* .

Also as Moliwda, after returning to Poland, he held theological debates with Talmudists in Lviv and published a book devoted to this subject. This gained him the recognition of the Archbishop of Lviv, Władysław Łubieński , who took him with him after his transfer to the Archbishopric of Gniezno and the Primateship and entrusted him with the function of Marshal of the Court. In the years 1764-1765 Kossakowski was a major in the royal army. In the mid-1760s , he experienced a disappointment in love and decided to join the Camaldolese monastery in Warsaw's Bielany; he sold his estate at that

time. He was dragged out of the monastery by the efforts of his family, especially Father Józef Kossakowski , the future Bishop of Inflanty.

On April 7, 1767, he was appointed secretary of the cabinet of King Stanisław August Poniatowski. He was active as a writer, writing panegyric poems, idylls, reflective, religious and political odes. He also translated Russian works into Polish, including the comedy of Tsarina Catherine *Obmanshchik*. He published many works in the journal *Zabawy Przyjemne i Pożyteczne* .

He became the hero of Andrzej Żuławski's essay *Moliwda* (1994).

As this story suggests, in the hands of a novelist as skilful as Tokarczuk, he will become one of the most intriguing characters of *The Books of Jacob*.

Context - European Enchantment with the Classical World

In Chapter 10, Kossakowski introduces one of the several “little strings of sand” creating the arabesques of European cultural crisis in the 18th century: the veneration of the pagan antiquity of Mediterranean Greece and Rome.

> He considers that the farther south he goes, the weaker Christianity becomes, the stronger the sun, the sweeter the wine, the more Fatum there is—and the better his life gets.” (p.763)

The yearning for the lost enchanted world of pagan antiquity was widely expressed in European culture by figures such as Goethe, Hölderlin and Schiller. Intellectuals did not only revive classical learning. They revived the spirits of pre-modern paganism, which have experienced waves of revival and fashion since the 18th century.

The German sociologist Max Weber was communicating with those spirits when he referred to the 'Disenchantment of the World' (*Entzauberung der Welt)*, which was a term he borrowed from Friedrich Schiller. The term refers to the banishment of superstition, myth, magic,

and ecstasy through the 'realistic' approach to the world of modern life, organised religion, and orderly civilization.

As well as the three major religions, the cultural influence of an imagined antiquity has been profoundly influential on Western intellectual life. In searching for biographical details on the real Antoni Kossakowski, I discovered a brilliant intellectual history of Polish culture - Jerzy Jedlicki, *Birth of the Intelligentsia, 1750–1831. A History of the Polish Intelligentsia, Part 1*. Jedlicki emphasises the imaginative hold of many versions of Antiquity on intellectuals like Moliwda.

> Moving backwards, one encounters yet another current which not only had decisively influenced both models discussed above but till the end of 18th century exerted a direct powerful influence on educated people: the model of the stoic sage, derived from Antiquity. It is fitting to remember that until World War I, rather than being just one among the several historical periods, Antiquity was perceived by educated Europeans as a Point-of Reference against which their contemporaneous devolved time was compared. As such, the function

> of Antiquity was not conservative at all; on the contrary, it served revolutionaries and instigators and, to no lesser extent, kings and emperors.
>
> Jerzy Jedlicki, *Birth of the Intelligentsia,1750–1831. A History of the Polish Intelligentsia, Part 1*

You ought to be able to dip into this *History of the Polish Intelligentsia* since it is available through the Directory of Open Access Books. Many of Tokarczuk's subtle references to Polish cultural history are unfamiliar to readers like me, maybe like you, who know too little of Polish culture. But Jedlicki, *Birth of the Intelligentsia* offers a free way to remedy that. I have only begun to sample it and will share more notes from this history of the intelligentsia as a social class in the epoch of Enlightenment as a companion to the slow read of Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob.*

It does brilliantly convey the multifarious cultural world that was in seemingly never-ending mutation in this period.

> The community's world-outlook was as heterogeneous as the group itself. It was being gradually formed out of various elements, models and patterns, from antique (stoicism), through mediaeval (priest), early modern (nobleman/gentleman), up to contemporaneous (rationalism, sentimentalism, libertinism, deism, Catholic Enlightenment). The majority of these inherited or imported ideas, visions and notions was subject in the Polish lands to a symptomatic evolution through which social aspects were reinforced at the expense of individualist ones.
>
> Jerzy Jedlicki, *Birth of the Intelligentsia,1750–1831*

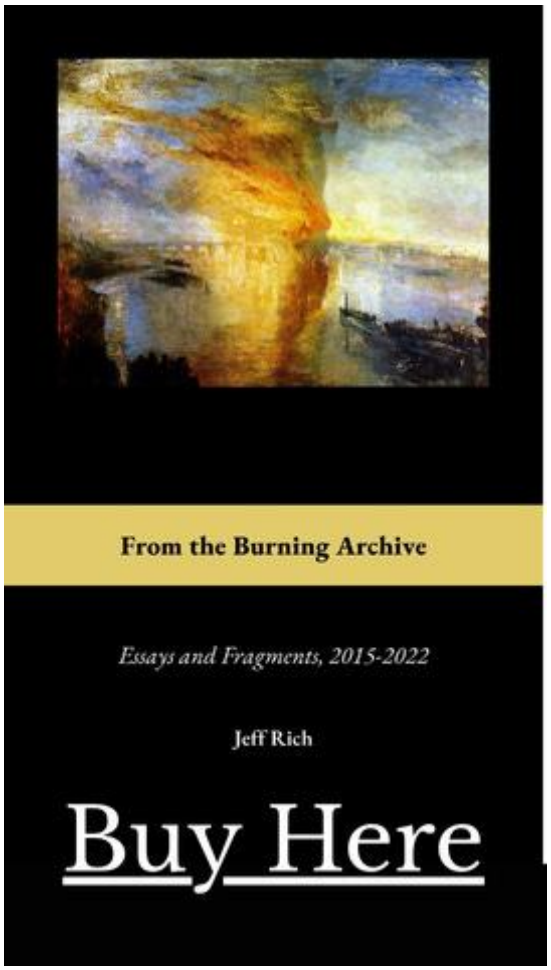
As we read on, we will see how those many "little strings of sand" create the twisting, chimerical, exquisite arabesques in the culture we still inhabit.

Thanks for reading

🙏❤️🌏

Jeff

P.S. Have you considered buying one of my books? My *From the Burning Archive: Essays and Fragments, 2015-2022* contains many of my reflections on literature and cultural history, including the story of the "Burning Archive" itself.



You can buy it (e-book and paperback) right here.

Comments ch 10

My Understandings & takeaways from Chapter 10

In Chapter 10, I was struck by Tokarczuk's use of North and South as a symbolic continuum. The North (Russia) is cool, introspective, and marked by personal responsibility—punctuated by raindrops and snowflakes. The South (Greece/Turkey) is sensuous, sun-drenched, and fatalistic—individuals seem absorbed by the outer world and passive in the face of it.

Irena, hailing from the North but living in the South, feels like a potential bridge—but of what, exactly? She is surrounded by men, walled in, and those who serve her most closely are castrates. This arrangement feels both symbolic and unsettling.

I was also intrigued by Count Kossakowski's heart pain at the beginning of the chapter—his symptoms seem to suggest a possible heart attack. Could it symbolize a kind of bodily or spiritual failure in the face of this overwhelming environment?

Moliwda's arc echoes classical mythology—he escapes one siren song only to be lured by another (Anna Popielawska), ending in disappointment. Are these siren calls illusions, longings, or a projection of masculine fantasy?

One line really lingered: "God created the world, and the effort of doing so killed him… That is why he starts to pray." If God is dead, why pray? Is prayer here an existential act—a cry into silence?

Finally, the figure gathering herbs on Mount Athos remains unseen. Is that the point? A reminder that some spiritual presences—or truths—resist visibility?

It took me a while to get my head around this chapter to see all the connections. I love the way the author introduces characters from different perspectives we are first introduced to Moliwda in chapt. 8 from Nahman's perspective.p.791 and in chapter 10 we see Moliwda from his own perspective.

I'll be interested in what others think.

Chapter 11

Books of Jacob | II. Book of Sand, Chapter 11

"for she would not be saved while he would live eternally"

> “But in reality, there was a chasm between them that could never be filled, a chasm so deep that it reached clear to the center of the earth, maybe even farther. It would be hard to explain it in words. To say she was a Jew, and he a Christian? That wasn’t it. That meant very little. At its heart it was that they represented two types of people, which at first glance no one could see, two human beings similar to one another but diametrically opposed: for she would not be saved, while he would live eternally.”
>
> (Tokarczuk, *Books of Jacob,* p. 748)

The he who would be saved in this passage is Moliwda (Antoni Kossakowski) who we met last week.

The she who would not be saved is Malka, the focal character of this week's slow read.

In chapter 11 Antoni Kossakowski meets Jacob in Craiova (current day Romania) in 1753. He had been attracted by stories of a holy fool, who is Jacob. In Craiova he meets his old friends, Reb Mordke and Nahman, who introduce him to Jacob. Then we learn Moliwda's back story in Poland, and why he might be fleeing his homeland.

He was born to a wealthy family and taken in by his uncle, who sent him to a chancellery to be educated. However, he was kicked out and sent to live with his mother's family to be taught how to run the small estate. There he had a love affair with a peasant Jewish woman, named Malka. She became pregnant; they eloped but their marriage was doomed. He would live eternally. She would not be saved. The story breaks off with Kossakowski and Malka's flight to Lithuania. This story will return later in the novel. He haunts Moliwda.

Moliwda, Jacob, Mordechai and Nahman discuss religion and philosophy, suspicions of espionage, a story about an extraordinary ring, and the life of the heretical, egalitarian sect of the Bogomils among whom Moliwda spent some of his happiest days.

For paid subscribers below I have some additional sources and notes to enrich your Slow Read.

- **chat question** - an opportunity to provide your feedback on the Slow Read as we are one-third of the way through
- **character** - Malka
- **context** - historical context on the Bogomils described on pages 740-735.

If you have not already done so, please upgrade your subscription, and read on to get more from your Slow Read of *The Books of Jacob.* And my voiceover of this post!

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Chat question

This week I would love to hear from you in comments or chat how you are finding the Slow Read and how I can make the experience better for you

How are you finding the Slow Read?

Is there anything you would like me to change about the weekly notes and discussion?

Would you like to do a live call dedicated to just to this Slow Read of The Books of Jacob?

You can respond to this chat question in the comments section.

I will also post a chat thread for paid subscribers.

I look forward to reading your experiences, insights, and perspectives.

Character - Malka

Malka is the daughter of the mill owner at Bielewicze, now close to the border of Poland and Belarus, directly north of Lviv. Antoni Kossakowski was sent by his noble there as a penance for a wayward youth. He became entranced by the lower status woman, even though she was already betrothed, likely against her own sentiments. “It was,” Tokarczuk writes, “more like two orphans joining forces.”

The recklessly irresponsible noble, however, made the Jewish Bovary pregnant. Her life became mortgaged to Kossakowski's Golden Liberty: "some madman—advised him to abduct her christen her, and marry her, so that both families, presented with a fair accompli, would find their fury defused. And so Antoni kidnapped Malka."

He went further, converting his captive from Jew to Christian. She was given the Christian name Małgorzata. It will not be the last conversion of the novel.

The abduction was a mad scheme of a fantasist, which as we will learn Kossakowski sensed he was.

> "Malka was a real person, whereas Antoni was a creature who merely resembled a person, false, not even worth paying attention to in the real world." (p. 748)

But still Antoni lets Malka become Małgorzata. He leads her to break from family, faith, and home. They flee “under cover of night to relatives in Lithuania. At this point their trail was lost” (p.747)

The trail will return later in the novel. All we know for now is somehow Kossakowski fled his past again to a village of Bogomils where he discovered the ways of bliss.

Context - the Bogomils

In Chapter 11, the section, *“Scraps: What we saw among Moliwda’s Bogomils”* narrated by Nahman, gives us a sense of the life of this sect, the Bogomils.

The Bogomils were a radical, influential Gnostic sect that were especially prevalent in Bulgaria, Bosnia, the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Nahman expresses astonishment that “there were so many similarities to what we ourselves believed” (p. 736)

Jacob Mikanowski, *Goodbye Eastern Europe: An Intimate History of a Divided Land* has a fine two pages on the Bogomils. I have reproduced them here for you, for study purposes only of course.

Similarly, much of the ribald cosmology of the Hutsuls had origins in the teachings of a now-extinct Gnostic sect called the Bogomils. The Bogomils were dualists: they believed the universe was split into two competing spheres, one good and one evil. The world of good was wholly immaterial and intangible. It was a world of the spirit, created and ruled over by a benevolent God, awaiting blessed souls after death. The world of matter, by contrast, was the domain of evil. It was created by God's rival, a demiurge called Satanael, as a trap. He designed everything we see, touch, taste, and smell as a way of keeping us imprisoned in his universe of filth, death, and darkness, and as far as possible from the other world of light, grace, and eternity.[7]

In keeping with this sharply bifurcated view of the cosmos, the Bogomils' spiritual practice consisted of working to distance themselves from the material world and move as much as possible toward the spiritual one. They avoided meat, marriage, and wine. Through temperance and prayer, their leaders learned to rise out of the foul swamp of this world. Their followers trusted that they could pull them up with them.

Where did these strange beliefs come from? They seem to have arrived in Eastern Europe in the tenth century, brought there by Armenian heretics who had been expelled from their homeland by the emperor of Byzantium and exiled to that empire's far northern frontier. In today's Bulgaria and Macedonia, their teachings inspired a Slavic preacher named Bogomil, or "Beloved of God," whose name eventually was used to refer to the movement as a whole.

From the start, Bogomils were at odds with the established church. They abjured the sacraments and hated the cross, which they took to be an instrument of torture. Their teachings embraced an element of social revolution as well. According to one Byzantine churchman who knew them well, the Bogomils taught their people to "revile the wealthy" and "hate the tsar."[8] Predictably, this stance did not endear them to the powerful. Persecuted in Bulgaria, the Bogomils found refuge in Constantinople. Burned for heresy there, they fanned out across the Balkans. One place they seem to have found a more permanent home is in Bosnia. But like everything to do with the Bogomils, the truth is shrouded in mystery.

The Bogomils did not leave behind any writings—all were destroyed by their persecutors. So virtually everything we know about them and

their beliefs comes from the mouths of their enemies. One rare exception comes from the medieval Russian city of Novgorod, where in the year 2000 archaeologists found a wooden tablet inscribed with fragments of a Bogomil text. This shows that Bogomil missionaries were at work, far from their Bulgarian homeland, by the year 1000. Sadly, the tablet preserves little of the actual content of their teachings.[9]

If we know little about the lives of the Bogomils, we know hardly more about the Kingdom of Bosnia, one of the least-documented states in medieval Europe. Still, we can say with some certainty that between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Bosnian church was in a state of intermittent schism with Rome. Unlike the Bulgarians, who took spiritual orders from Byzantium, the Bosnians were nominally Catholic, but at odds with the church hierarchy. Many believe the reason was that the Bosnian church was largely in the hands of Bogomils. Some think this is why more Christians converted to Islam in Bosnia than in almost any other part of the Balkans—their allegiance to the church was already nominal.

While the degree of the Bosnian Church's deviation from orthodoxy remains up for debate, the idea of a Bogomil past has become an integral part of what it means to be Bosnian. It finds its most powerful expression in a type of monumental gravestone called a *stećak*. The high karst landscape of Bosnia, and especially Herzegovina, is littered with thousands of these enigmatic monuments. Made of white limestone as pale as moonlight, they were carved with a variety of ornaments, including animals, dancers, spirals, solar disks, and stars, whose meaning remains unclear. They are part of the vanished heritage of the Bogomils, speaking to us over the centuries in a language we can no longer understand.

The Bogomils have been a powerful source of identity for Bosnians precisely because of how *different* they were from the rest of Europe. The same can be said for the Hussites in the Czech lands. Like the Bogomils, the Hussites took their name from their founder, Jan Hus. A priest born around 1370 to a poor family in Bohemia, Hus rose quickly through the clerical ranks to become rector of the University of Prague. There he preached against the greed of the bishops and the mad power-hunger of the popes. He wanted an end to the church's financial

Thanks for your Support

Thanks for reading. I have kept the post to under 1000 words this time, plus the excerpts from Mikanowski. Please do leave a comment with your feedback so I can refine the experience of this Slow Read.

Comments ch 11

Sandra

From Tin to Timeline: Exploring…Apr 22

Liked by Jeff Rich

My Understanding of Chapter 11:

Language as a Motif in The Books of Jacob

Some thoughts and understandings from Chapter 11.

This chapter continues to develop the motif of language—its importance and its role in shaping relationships, power, and identity.

Although this reflection focuses on Chapter 11, I've drawn connections to earlier chapters to trace how language functions as a motif throughout the novel.

"Then suddenly it dawns on him that this is the language of all these people around, this mix of people who are always on the road, instead of some language carefully assembled in a single place for the benefit of a few." —Moliwda, p. 754

This perception of language as fluid, shared, and rooted in everyday experience stands in complex relation to other moments in the text where language functions quite differently:

* Yente, who swallows the words and their power—not only in the prologue but elaborated further on p. 909, where we learn she does so knowingly, not as a passive victim as others assume.

* The tension between Father Chmielowski and Elisha Shorr as they struggle to communicate, with Hrycko as a mediator: "I'm unskilled in the Polish language, all I know is the normal words, the kind people use." —p. 948

* Father Chmielowski, who is taken aback by Druzbacka's critique of his language, particularly how it fails to reach everyone —p. 894

* The elevated linguistic practices of the Kabbalists, whose shuffling, pronouncing, and counting of letters are portrayed as pathways to true spirituality —p. 836

And so much more ...

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The gardener

The gardener Apr 25 *Edited*

Yes - it's this mix of language that fascinates me. How people identify others by it, how accent plays a part - particularly Jacob who always has an accent no matter what language he speaks - and its role in discussing matters and passing on cultural identity and religious beliefs.

I mentioned after the first chapter about the translator when Father Chmielowski visits Schorr looking for a book and they (translators) continue to be represented probably because all religions have translators, it's just that they are not called that. I suppose it also represents the region at the time with all the trade and movement of people.

Words seem to hold a fascination for Tokarczuk as much as the people we are meeting in the book, and will I imagine, only become more important as we see Frank develop further and convert. With conversion there might be an emphasis on new words and the way they are used.

I was also taken with the Bogomils (I thought the name was made up at first - something you might find in The Hobbit) and their sense of equality between the sexes and a matriarchal community but what is is about children in these communities/sects that don't belong to anyone or are looked after by the elder women? Why can't you be a parent? I digress!

I think we started with Chmielowski who is writing the book of everything because if we all read the same words we would all be in the same world (or words to that effect). Of course, that isn't how words work and it didn't work with Schorr so maybe the fog in the first book is

a fog of languages. What I can't quite do at the moment is make the link between sand and words/languages to extend that comparison, if indeed it can be.

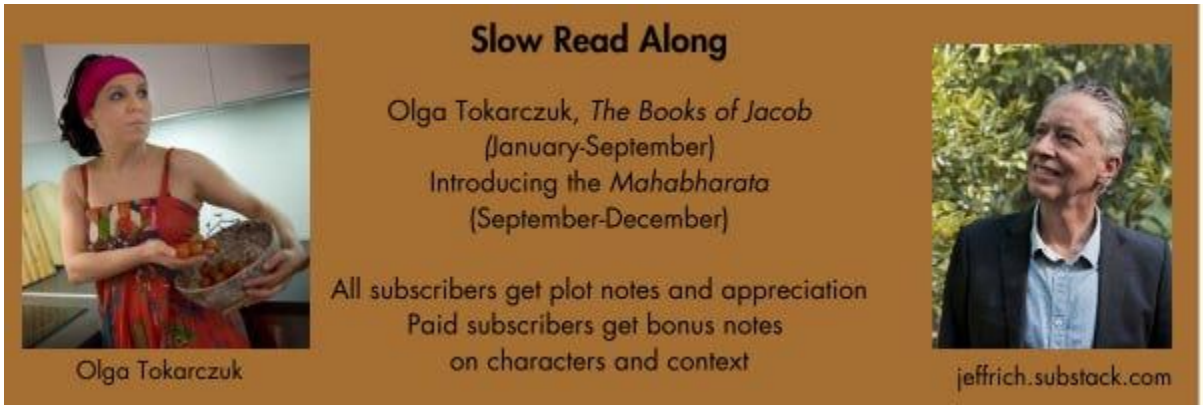
It also just occurred to me that the characters change their names a lot and I suspect this is also linked to the idea of languages and changes. Why do people feel the need to change their name? To fit in, to be a more accurate representation of themselves, to reflect trends in names?

Chapter 12

Slow Read Along of The Books of Jacob | II. Book of Sand, Chapter 12

"There is one God in three figures, and the fourth is the holy Mother."

Welcome to the Slow Read Along of Olga Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob*. You read along at your own pace, and I comment on one chapter a week over 32 weeks. I share my voiceover and glimpses into characters and context for paid subscribers. This week we look at chapter 12 where we meet the holy Mother.



Olga Tokarczuk won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2018. The New Yorker described The Books of Jacob as an "Essential Read."

Meeting the Holy Mother in A Book of Sand

> "In the sand strewn over the table that served as our slate, Isohar drew triangles, and marked their corners according to what was in the Zohar.... and then the triangle stands on its head, now the God of Truth is on top, and beneath him is the Shekhinah and the Shekhinah's vessel, the Messiah."
>
> (Tokarczuk, *Books of Jacob,* p. 714-713)

At the start of chapter 12, we see Jacob, through the sceptical eyes of Abraham writing to Tovah, "as a restless and agitated man, not a rebel or a sage." Abraham pleas, "I deeply want to believe that you knew what you were doing, giving Hana to someone like him." The seed of doubt will grow and grow in Tovah's mind.

Nahman has his doubts too, and wrestles with them and his will to believe. Jacob's self-assurance fixes Nahman's belief.

There is nothing that brings greater relief than the certainty that there is someone who really knows. For we ordinary people never have such certainty.

Tokarczuk, The Books of Jacob (Nahman, p. 729)

In Salonika, Jacob challenges and defies Konio, a rival successor in Sabbatai Tzvi's prophetic line, the son of the Second, Baruchiah. Jacob uses fear and intimidation. "Whoever fears, respects. That's just the way it is," he says. Nahman is uneasy with the confrontation, but with Mordechai's assurance the group are drawn more deeply into Jacob's cult. They live solely on alms while dedicating their lives to religious study under Jacob.

From Nikopol, in 1754, Hana sends news that she has given birth to a daughter, named Eva, and nicknamed Avacha. Following the news of the birth, Jacob has an ecstatic, spiritual experience, ruah haKodesh, when the spirit descends into man. There is synchronicity between Eva's birth and the descent of the spirit into Jacob. Jacob's spiritual transformation

most would assume to be a “solemn, noble moment” but it “turns out to be more like a flogging, or a birth. (724)

Jacob and his followers are harried and ostracised from Salonika. Konio’s followers attempt to assassinate Jacob. He survives but he and his group decide to leave for Smyrna. Jacob develops an eczema-like illness, which, prompted by the remark of a Thessalonian ‘witch’ that he was “molting like a snake” convinces his followers that Jacob is the Messiah, associated with the symbol of the serpent. When Jacob plunges into the sea, the illness is cured, and Nahman narrates the story as a miracle cure. His submission to Jacob is deepened as they sailed through a storm to Smyrna. Jacob humiliates Nahman, who “finds an odd pleasure in it.” He promises never to leave Jacob.

After returning to Smyrna, with the family of Hana, Jacob and Eva united, his followers practise the Kabbalah. Elisha Shorr from Rohatyn arrives in Smyrna on Nahman’s invitation and convinces the group to return to Poland. They travel to Czernowitz where Jacob’s father reveals his view of his son’s character. The group are held up at the

Ottoman-Poland border, where Jacob performs a Dervish whirl, mixing Jewish, Sufi, Christian and even Russian traditions.

“I am a dancer,” proclaims Jacob. Reb Elisha Shorr replies that Jacob is a holy fool.

For paid subscribers below I have some additional sources and notes to enrich your Slow Read. Next week we begin the Book of the Road.

- **chat question** - Tell me what caught your eye in an interview with Olga Tokarczuk
- **character** - Hana
- **context** - Shekhinah.

If you have not already done so, please upgrade your subscription, and read on to get more from your Slow Read of *The Books of Jacob.* And my voiceover of this post!

Subscribed

Chat question

This week I would love to hear your comments on this interview with Olga Tokarczuk. She discusses the constellation novel, *The Books of Jacob* (from about timestamp 7:00), and in a serendipitous link to my own reading Zygmunt Bauman's idea of liquid modernity (from about timestamp 11:00), and the hidden signs of the Jewish tradition.

What ideas appealed to you in Olga Tokarczuk's interview?

You can respond to this chat question in the comments section.

I will also post a chat thread for paid subscribers.

I look forward to reading your experiences, insights, and perspectives.

Character - Hana

Jacob and Hana, Polish National Theatre, The Books of Jacob performance

Hana is not on the surface the principal character of this chapter. Her significance comes out more deeply, however, when Hana is linked to the symbol of the Holy Mother, the Shekhinah; when Hana's birth of Eva is

synchronised in the narrative with the descent of the spirit into Jacob; when the reader looks ahead and realises that her child Eva will become Jacob's successor as the religious leader of the Frankists.

We see Hana in glimpses throughout the chapter. Abraham voices her father's doubts about the wisdom of giving his beloved Hana to Jacob. We see her distorted mirror in Nahman and Jacob's fascination with her double, Hershel. We see her absence in Jacob's misbehaviour in Salonika and the 'witch' of Thessalonika. Her maternal presence is embodied in Jacob's religious ecstasy of the ruah haKodesh. Her devotion is assumed when Elisha Shorr tells Jacob that he will go first to Poland, "and then Hana will come to you." We watch her make her home with the prodigal Jacob in Smyrna. Nahman recorded in his *Scraps*:

> Jacob and Hana, and that tiny little girl who had recently been born to them, rented a small house on a side street. Hana, with the dowry given by her father, even arranged it so that it was pleasant to go there and sit for a bit, while she, in the Turkish fashion, would disappear

with the child into the women's part of the home, although I often felt from somewhere her gaze on my back. 714

Her Turkish fashion even appears in Jacob's Sufi dance. Does she also appear, in the story, and in Jacob's mind, as a manifestation of the Shekhinah?

One Smyrna night, stuffy from the fragrance of the orange blossoms, for it was already spring, Isohar revealed to us the following secret:

There is one God in three figures, and the fourth is the holy Mother.

(Books of Jacob, p 712)

Context - Shekhinah

After feeling Hanah's gaze on his back, Nahman records in his *Scraps*:

"In the sand strewn over the table that served as our slate, Isohar drew triangles, and marked their corners according to what was in the Zohar and then according to the teaching of Sabbatai Tzvi, blessed be

> his name. Someone stopping by might have thought that we were children playing at drawing.
>
> There is the God of truth in the spiritual world and the Shekhinah imprisoned in matter, and as if "underneath them," in the lower corner of the triangle, there is God the Creator, the cause of Divine sparks. When the Messiah comes, he eliminates the First Reason, and then the triangle stands on its head, now the God of Truth is on top, and beneath him is the Shekhinah and the Shekhinah's vessel, the Messiah."
>
> (Tokarczuk, *Books of Jacob,* pp. 714-713)

This brief article, *Shekhinah: the Divine Feminine,* emphasises how contemporary Jewish feminists—and Olga Tokarczuk is certainly a feminist writer—have embraced the concept of the *shekhinah*.

> In contemporary Jewish discourse, the term *shekhinah* most commonly refers to the divine feminine, or to the feminine aspect of God — God

> as mother, nurturer, protector and compassionate one. Though the term — from the Hebrew root meaning to “dwell” — is found throughout early rabbinic literature, in its early usage it referred generally to God’s presence among the people and had no gender associations. The connection between *shekhinah* and femininity emerges mainly in Jewish mystical literature. The concept was later embraced by Jewish feminists as a counterbalance to prevailing masculine notions of God as king, father and judge.
>
> *Shekhinah: the Divine Feminine*

Later in the story, Jacob, Hana and Eva will all see the Shekhinah in this miraculous icon at the Cathedral at Częstochhowa. Feel free to read ahead on this slow read. You set the pace. And the best reading is rereading.

🙏❤️🌏

Jeff

The Black Madonna, Our Lady of Częstochowa

Comments ch 12

My takeaways from Chapter 12:

"It smells of oranges, the kind already swollen with juice, the sweetest and best to eat, that in the blink of an eye become overripe and fetid." (p.730) This seems like clear foreshadowing for the chapter's events: the oranges, at first sweet and perfect, quickly rot and become repulsive. This sudden shift suggests a broader metaphor — how life, love, or happiness can spoil or collapse in an instant. Although it describes fruit, it feels symbolic of fleeting moments of hope or glory in human lives, perhaps especially in Jacob's.

Signs of Psychological Deterioration:

Nahman's early reflections on Jacob hint at emerging mental instability:

• "I did begin to think that he was going mad without me, and that as soon as I found him, he would calm down and stop stubbornly imitating the First One (of blessed memory)." (p.730) Even here, Nahman senses Jacob's declining mental state, and also positions himself as Jacob's potential saviour.

• "Who had led him to this. Who had helped him get like this while I was gone?" (p.729)

Jacob then falls ill, and his symptoms (p.718) could suggest poisoning (given his many enemies) but they might also indicate a deeper psychological break. The fit (p.724) and sloughing of skin could hint at a stress-induced or psychotic episode, aligning with the early signs Nahman observed. The narrative leaves open whether Jacob's decline is physical, psychological, or both.

Childhood Roots of Instability:

The visit to Jacob's father, Yehuda Leyb Buchbinder (p.711), sheds light on the origins of Jacob's troubled psyche:

• "So it is: our parents remind us of what we like least about ourselves, and in their growing old we see our many sins." (p.710) This suggests that Jacob's identity and guilt are deeply entangled with his family history.

• A chilling memory emerges: as a child, Jacob cruelly tormented a smaller boy until he forced the victim to falsely confess and take blame (p.709). This disturbing early behaviour

suggests a broken capacity for empathy and morality from a young age, foreshadowing the destructive patterns seen later in his life.

The chapter closes with a brutal outsider's assessment:

"Well, if you ask me, he's a crackpot." (p.707), bluntly affirming the breakdown that others are beginning to notice.

Nahman's Entrapment and His Entrapment of Jacob:

As the group crosses the sea, these psychological tensions deepen. Nahman, once meticulously recording everything, now withholds events from his account, perhaps out of confusion, fear, or loyalty.

Jacob seizes dominance over Nahman, extracting a vow of lifelong allegiance when Nahman is most vulnerable. The others laugh it off (p.715), failing to recognise the gravity of the psychological bond being forged.

Later, Nahman reflects with unease:

• "I maintained that it was divine will guiding us, placing us in front of people and having us meet precisely the ones we most needed to see, but the truth was otherwise." (p.712)

He even asks:

• "Did Jacob know what we had in store for him?"

The entanglement between Nahman and Jacob increasingly mirrors the historical relationship between Nathan of Gaza and Sabbatai Zevi, with Nahman desperately believing in Jacob's messiahship despite the many warning signs of mental and possible moral collapse.

Book 3- Book of the Road

Chapter 13-15

Olga Tokarczuk, The Books of Jacob, Chapters 13-15

> "Maybe there are some truths that elude the capacity of reason, maybe not everything can be contained within the Scriptures, maybe a new entry needs to be created for his Gitla, something about people like her. Maybe she actually is a Polish princess, in her soul."
>
> (Tokarczuk, *Books of Jacob,* p. 678)

This week I guide you through chapters 13 to 15 from the start of *The Book of the Road*. This Book recounts Jacob's return to Podolia and the growth of his religious community.

Chapter 13 has nine sections. It begins in 1755 when plague struck Poland, while Jacob and his followers walked the road from the Turkish border to the Polish towns where their heresies will be revealed to the world. We see Jacob through the eyes of spies, and the sceptical mind of Sobla, who is caring for the holy woman, Yente. In Lwów, many of the

prosperous Jewish community deride Jacob's proclamation of himself as Messiah. But others are drawn to his "strange, almost inconceivable gift." Among those attracted to Jacob are "the Lord's female guardians" who serve both as his security detail and his sexual companions. The Frankists engage in semi-religious, group sexual practices in "some secret acts in Lanckoroń." But a member of the orthodox Jewish community spies them. One of the guardians, who by Jacob's side "has been like a she-wolf, right up until that calamitous night in Lanckoroń" (p. 678) is Gitla Pinkasówna. Gitla is the daughter of Pinkas, the secretary to the rabbi of Lwów. It is Gitla who despite reason may actually be a Polish princess, in her soul.

Chapter 14 has eleven sections. Bishop Dembowski discusses the Jewish heresy spreading in Polish towns, and his frustrated schemes to expel all the Jews. Father Chmielowski and Elzbieta Drużbacka exchange correspondence on poetry and how women manage the households of the Polish nobility. The reports of that calamitous night in Lanckoroń make their way to Gitla's father's boss, who relieves the ashamed father of his duties because of his daughter's heresy and madness. On Pinkas's

initiative, the orthodox Jews of Poland pronounce a curse, a *herem*, on Frank and his followers, including Gitla. Meanwhile, Bishop Dembowski, his "imagination on fire," conceives a scheme to exploit the Lanckoroń scandal and to convert the Jewish heretics. He writes to his patron Bishop Sołtyk of his dreams to serve his ecclesiastical ambition and Poland's imperial glory.

> If this were to come to Fruition, the Feat of it would gain Poland Renown all around the world—that in the Holy Commonwealth we managed to convert the Pagans without going all the Way to India, instead converting our very own local Savages."
>
> (Tokarczuk, *Books of Jacob,* p. 648)

Chapter 15 is shorter with five sections. The curse, *herem*, pronounced on Jacob's followers begins to remake their world. Gitla is banished and falls into prostitution at the end of chapter 14. Jacob, Elisha Shorr and Nahman see the Shekhinah in the new Christian statue of Holy Mary that the Poles erected over an old minaret in Kamieniec. They open

themselves to negotiations with the resentful, sectarian, untrustworthy Dembowski to convert to Christianity. One leading follower, Krysa, dreams of receiving land from the Christian Polish nobles where their small community can lead a dignified, independent, and free life on the land. Elisha Shorr's most loved daughter, Hayah, who was at the centre of the group sex scandal of Lanckoroń, feels herself part of the mystery of the Shekhinah. She has two natures: "the matriarch, an eldest daughter who has taken on the obligations of a mother" and "daytime Hayah, sunny and bright." Hayah gives herself to Jacob, and her father sees the shapes of the new letters found in Chmielowski's *New Athens*. At the end of the chapter, Jacob defies his followers' practical schemes. He decides on a great betrayal of his faith.

You'll see, all of you. The bishop and I have an understanding.

Jacob, The Books of Jacob, p. 627

Chat and Comment Question

This week, I am opening up my chat/comment question to all readers. It is Mental Health Awareness Month in the USA. We promote mental health awareness in October down under. Olga Tokarczuk was a clinical psychologist before making her career as a writer. The experience gave her acute insight into mental illness, and character, and exquisite sensitivity to the subtlety of its stories.

My chat and comment question takes up that theme of mental illness in fiction, as represented in the story of the Polish Princess, in her soul, Gitla Pinkasówna.

What are some of the best representations of mental illness in fiction or historical novels?

You can respond to this chat question in the comments section.

Leave a comment

I look forward to reading your experiences, insights, and perspectives.

For paid subscribers below I have some additional notes to enrich your Slow Read.

- **character** - Gitla Pinkasówna, the Polish Princess in her own mind
- **context** - the real incident at Lanckoroń on which Tokarczuk based her story.

Please upgrade your subscription to get the most from your reading of *The Books of Jacob*, guided by a little bit of imaginative, cultured world history.

Usually there is a paywall here, but this week all readers can enjoy what I offer you every week. It is my gift and invitation to you.

Subscribed

Character - Gitla Pinkasówna

Polish National Theatre performance on The Books of Jacob, showing from the left, Gitla, Asher, Hrycko, Elisha Shorr, and Nahman

Gitla Pinkasówna was my favourite character in the novel. The story of her relationship with her father, Pinkas, and the kindly Asher Rubin is profoundly moving. The novel will trace her transformation from, in The Book of the Road, the adolescent girl who believed herself to be a Polish Princess and bonded sexually with the charismatic Jacob, to, at the novel's end, a scholar reading Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" in Vienna coffeehouses.

We first meet her as one of the Lord's female guardians, who claims descent from Polish-Lithuanian royalty. She tells "everyone she was the great-granddaughter of the king of Poland, and that her father had found her in a basket lined with swan's down, and that a swan had even nursed her with its milk." (p. 679) But the scandal of Lanckoroń lays her low, and the curse, initiated by her own father, nearly destroys her. Hayah tells her rival guardian to leave Jacob's house, and to return to her father, begging forgiveness.

Gitla returns to Lwów and watches the community that had cursed her. She hears women at the synagogue lament the fate of her father. But Gitla cannot overcome the curse Pinkas brought down on her head. She falls into poverty, begging and prostitution.

> Slowly she reconciles herself to the thought that she looks like a harlot—dirty, with matted hair, and hungry. And suddenly she feels absolutely free. She goes into the first decent courtyard she comes across and up the first decent building, and then she climbs the stairs

> to the first floor and knocks on the first decent-looking door she encounters.
>
> (Tokarczuk, *Books of Jacob,* p. 643)

That door is opened by a stooping man with glasses, who we met in the first chapter of the novel, Asher Rubin, the Jewish doctor and lens grinder of Rohatyn.

> "What do you want?" he asks in a hoarse, low voice, and reflexively starts searching for groszy to give her alms.
>
> "I am the great-granddaughter of the Polish king," says Gitla. "I am looking for a decent place where I can spend the night."
>
> (Tokarczuk, *Books of Jacob,* p. 643)

Rubin admits her, cares for her, and learns that maybe there are some truths that elude the capacity of reason, and maybe Gitla is a Polish princess, in her soul. One act of freedom and one act of mercy will take

Gitla and Asher Rubin all the way to the central European Enlightenment.

Context - Scandal of Lanckoroń

The sexual scandal in Lanckoroń catalysed Gitla's ruin and Jacob's conversion. Like so many stories in *The Books of Jacob*, this event is a well-documented historical event. Simon Schama, *Belonging: The Story of the Jews, 1492 —1900* provides the story without Tokarczuk's fiction, and with his own form of historical magic.

When Jacob Leibovich, later Frank, crossed the Polish border in 1755 he unwittingly re-entered the Jewish community during a time of "crisis and consternation." How should the Jewish community deal with the Shabbetean heresies that were common especially in Podolia? The Jewish Council of the Four Lands was divided. Some wanted to root out the heresy. Others wanted to let the sleeping dogs of "underground Shabbateanism stay that way rather than risk fracturing the community."

The scandal of Lanckoroń exploded in this crisis and consternation. Schama writes:

> But at the end of January 1756, something happened in the small town of Lanckoronie on the Moldavian border which ruled out an expedient solution. On the night of 27-28 January, someone had peered through the gaps in drapes covering the windows of a certain house and spied a group of twelve to fifteen men, including Jacob Frank himself, singing and dancing in a Shabbatean ritual. Many of the accounts, written up much later, reported that song and dance was the least of it. Jacob Emden, writing just four years on, and in a prosecutorial vein, had a more colourful story to tell. But his account was supported by that of a local Christian canon dating from only a year after the scandalous event. They described the local rabbi's wife [Hayah], seated as if on a throne, either half or fully naked (depending on the account) wearing a Torah crown on her head. Every so often the men dancing in a circle about her would stop and kiss her breasts, calling her their *mezuzah* - the miniature tablet fixed to Jewish doorposts containing verses from the Torah. The ritual was obviously based on Shabbetai's own

> notorious 'wedding' to the Torah, enacted under a canopy in the Smyrna synagogue during Hannukah in which he took the mystic marriage of Jews with the Torah literally. During the processing of the Sefer Torah in synagogue before and after readings, it is customary to touch the covered scrolls with the fringe of a worshipper's prayer shawl and kiss it. At Lanckoronie, the 'Torah bride' had been replaced by an actual bride, notwithstanding her marriage to the rabbi. Jacob Frank's style was to turn matters from the poetic to the physical. Some reports also claimed that the orgiasts had worn the cross around their necks.
>
> (Schama, *Belonging,* pp. 446-447)

The scandal spread beyond the Jewish community and engaged the Christians who, like Bishop Dembowski, were on the hunt for incriminating claims against the Jews. Investigations began that revealed a "whole network of Shabbateans throughout Podolia." The investigation led to the curse.

> At the conclusion of the proceeedings in the middle of June 1756, a *herem* excommunication was passed on the miscreants, most dramatically on Joseph of Rohatyn who was given the same punishment as Uriel da Cosa - the thirty-nine lashes and laid at the threshold of the synagogue so that members of the congregation could tread on him as they exited. He was ordered to divorce the wife who had slept with strangers on his instructions, his children were declared bastards, and he was banished, to be sent as a criminal wanderer out into the wilderness.
>
> (Schama, *Belonging*, p. 448)

The curse would lead to the catastrophes that followed the dispute between the orthodox Jews and excommunicated anti-Talmudists. The dispute coincided with the start of the Seven Years War, which Winston Churchill called the first world war.

And we will tell that story next week.

I hope all my readers enjoyed this week's Slow Read post. You can check back and catch up on the whole Slow Read of *The Books of Jacob*, with lists of characters and guides to context on my Slow Read page.

Please join me as a paid subscriber to enjoy all the fantastic journeys of *The Books of Jacob* and the *Burning Archive*.

Subscribed

Thanks for reading

Tracing the Religious Web in The Books of Jacob

Before sharing my reflections on Chapters 13–15 specifically, I wanted to post this general comment to help myself (and possibly others) make sense of the complex religious landscape that informs so much of the novel. Understanding these distinctions has helped me appreciate the motivations and tensions among the characters. I'd welcome any corrections or additions from others more familiar with these traditions—this is my attempt to map out the landscape for my own understanding as I read.

Abrahamic Religions:

1. Judaism

2. Christianity

3. Islam

All three religions trace their roots to the figure of Abraham, who is revered as a prophet and patriarch.

The Hebrew Bible forms the foundation of both Judaism and Christianity. It was written over many centuries in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The nature of ancient writing—no punctuation, minimal spacing, all capital letters, and, in the case of Hebrew, no vowels—made interpretation complex.

This may explain the Jewish fascination with letters and textual interpretation among Jewish diaspora in The Books of Jacob, as they grapple with the dense, layered nature of sacred texts.

The Hebrew Bible is identified differently depending on religious lens being used:

• Tanakh(or Tanach) is the Jewish designation, an acronym for:

◦ Torah (Law or Teaching)

◦ Nevi'im (Prophets)

◦ Ketuvim (Writings)

• Old Testament is the Christian term for roughly the same set of texts, though their arrangement and inclusion may differ depending on the denomination

Key Differences Between Jewish and Christian Old Testaments:

Different translations reflect differing theological assumptions and priorities.

1. Translation- the process of translation leads to a different bias based on the translator's religious background.

◦ Septuagint (c. 3rd century BCE): Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, influential for early Christians.

◦ Vulgate (c. 382–405 AD): Latin translation by Jerome, became the standard Bible of the Roman Catholic Church.

2. Arrangement of Texts: Jewish and Christian versions of the Bible often contain the same books but in a different order, which can affect interpretation and narrative flow

3. Content : of the Old testament. The Jewish rely on the Hebrew manuscripts as their source. The Christians have more that one arrangement depending on the type of Christianity which in turn is dependent on who was doing the translation and what sources are being drawn upon,

Religious Textbooks and Interpretive Traditions:

• The Torah: Central to Judaism, comprising the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The Frankists in The Books of Jacob reject the normative Jewish interpretation of the Torah. [cf. p.671]]

• The Talmud [Jewish] A multi-volume record of rabbinic debates (2nd–5th centuries CE) interpreting the Torah for real-life application. Frankists reject the Talmud, seeing it as a corruption of original teachings—thus they are dubbed “Contra-Talmudists.” [cf. p.675] .

• Catechism [Christian]: a collection of Christian writings of the principles of Christian religion in the form of questions and answers, used for religious instruction

• Zohar – A central text in Kabbalah, a Jewish mystical tradition. It consists largely of mystical commentaries on the Torah and is highly symbolic and allegorical. Jacob Frank’s teachings draw heavily from the Zohar, though in unconventional and controversial ways, blending mysticism with antinomian (law-reversing) theology.

While I’ve focused here on the dominant Abrahamic traditions, the novel also references more radical sects—like the Adamites [mentioned page 673]—whose practices and beliefs further complicate the spiritual landscape.

Book 4- Book of Comet

Chapter 16-18

Slow Read: Books of Jacob, chapters 16-18

“Poland is a country where freedom of religion and religious hatreds meet on equal terms.”

The Story - Book of the Road, Chapters 16 to 18

These three chapters take us to the end of the road for Jacob Frank and his followers wandering, from Türkiye back to Poland and then to a small village in current-day Moldavia. Chapter 16 begins with an outburst of book burning in 1757 in Kamieniec and Lwów (yes, another burning archive!), provoked by Polish religious hatreds and Jacob Frank’s heretical Judaism. Chapter 18 ends with the establishment in 1759 of a Utopian, cult-like community of Jacob Frank and his followers in Iwania, now Harmaţca in Moldavia. The Frankists appear to have settled in freedom, yet they are watched through the eyes of Moliwda, who seems

to be both a faithful believer and a spy for the Catholic Church, whose leading bishop prepares the Frankists covertly for conversion.

In **Chapter 16** there are thirteen sections that follow the varied reactions of some principal characters to the dispute between the orthodox Jews, Frankist heretics and Catholic Poland that followed the incident at Lanckoroń which I covered in my last context post. We see the reactions of and consequences for Moliwda, Jacob and his followers, Asher Rubin, Katarzyna Kossakowska, Bishop Kajetan Sołtyk, Sobla, Pesel, Yente, Father Chmielowski and his literary friend, Elżbieta Drużbacka. These events unfold in the context of a forgotten global war, the Seven Years War, which our immortal fourth-person narrator, Yente sees "will tip the scales that measure human life" (p. 625).

Jacob's victory, facilitated by a secret deal with Bishop Dembowski, in the disputation or court case over the Lanckoroń incident leads to an outburst of book burning, anti-Jewish violence and religious hatred. Bishop Dembowski suffers for his bad karma. He is promoted for his scheme but soon dies. Without his protection, Jacob flees Poland. Asher

Rubin protects his Polish Princess while serving the persecuted Jewish community of Lwów. Katarzyna Kossakowska urges protection and grants of land for the Frankist heretics, while Bishop Kajetan Sołtyk takes Dembowski's place. Elżbieta Drużbacka writes to Chmielowski of the "imperfection of imprecise forms." He shares his ambition to visit the great Załuski library. Then one night a bashed Elisha Shorr brings a cartload of books to Chmielowski for safe keeping. Frightened by the violence and book burning, Sobla and Pesel take the frail, immortal Yente to a cave "until it is safe." Do not forget about this cave, in the shape of an alef.

> *"It is so beautiful and so cruel at the same time. A paradox that seems to be taken straight from the pages of the Zohar." (Books of Jacob, p. 586)*

In **Chapter 17** there are thirteen sections that trace the growing conspiracy of the Polish nobles, especially Kossakowska, and Catholic Church to support the cause of the "Jewish Puritans," but by

perpetrating a blood-libel against Poland's Jews. We also follow Nahman, Moliwda, Hana and the Frankists' adaptation to the difficult cause of their heretical life. Jacob's closest followers find him in Giurgiu in Türkiye. They convert to Islam, farm a small property, and consider returning to Poland with Hana and Jacob's second child, Immanuel. Shorr retrieves his books from Father Chmielowski and gifts the priest a copy of *Kabbala Denudata* by von Rosenroth.

In **Chapter 18** there are twelve sections which describe the life of the Frankists in their Ivanie community, the ambivalence of key characters, especially Moliwda and Nahman, towards Jacob as a cult leader, and the negotiation of the terms of an agreement with the Polish Catholic Church to do the unthinkable, to convert to Catholicism. Father Pikulski settles the plan with Archbishop Łubieński to convert these "dogs without masters." Jacob and his followers may want to preserve their distinct blend of beliefs and customs. But the Church has other plans.

> "Baptism is baptism… it must be unconditional. We must demand from them an unconditional conversion, no exceptions, and as soon as

> possible… The first to be baptized must be their leader, his wife, and their children. And with as much pomp and circumstance as possible, so that everyone hears of it and sees it. There can be no further discussion. (p. 499)

The scene is set for the *Book of the Comet*, and the conversion of Jacob Frank in 1759. Once again, as Tokarczuk wrote of the Lwów book burnings, "the capricious forces of the world have switched sides, for who knows how long" (p. 622).

Question for Readers

The symbolism of books pervades the *Books of Jacob*, and in these chapters the *burning of books* is a central symbol of religious hatred, cultural destruction, and yet also cultural survival. Stories of burning books, libraries and burning archives intrigue me. We associate them with Germany in the 1930s, but, sadly, they have been so much more common in history.

The sight of the burning books, their pages fluttering in the flames, draws people in, arrays them in a circle, like a magician at a fair who has ordered chickens to do as he says. People gaze into the flames and find they like this theatre of destruction, and a free-floating anger mounts within them, although they don't know whom to turn it on—but their outrage more or less automatically makes them hostile to the owners of these ruined books. (p. 622)

QUESTION FOR READERS:

What is your response to the stories of burning books?

Leave a comment

Character - Elżbieta Drużbacka

There are 120 or more characters in *The Books of Jacob.* Most are drawn from real history. Many of their names change through the novel. My guide helps you keep track of these dazzling character portraits.

Over the last 14 weeks I have profiled: Benedykt Chmielowski, Katarzyna Kossakowska, Elisha Shorr and family, Kajetan Sołtyk, Nahman, Jacob Frank, Yente, Sabbatai Tzvi, Reb Mordke, Hana, Tovah, Antoni Kossakowski or Moliwda, and Malka.

This week I profile Elżbieta Drużbacka.

Druzbacka
JAN MIECZKOWSKI
W WARSZAWIE.

Later 19th century drawing of Elżbieta Drużbacka

Elżbieta Drużbacka is a poet, mother, governess and manager of the estate of a powerful Polish noble family. She maintains a writing life despite all those roles, and through her correspondence with Chmielowski we discover her hidden connection to Jacob.

In the tenth section of chapter 16 she writes a letter to Chmielowski that expresses her literary credo, her *ars poetica*. She concludes the letter by parrying the gendered assumptions of literary merit that her friend might have held.

> You will say: "imprecise, idle chatter." And no doubt you'll be right. Maybe the whole art of writing, my dear friend, is the perfection of imprecise forms . . . (p. 591)

One senses Tokarczuk voices through Drużbacka her own philosophy about writing.

> I believe that to express in language the vastness of the world, it is impossible to use words that are too transparent, too unambiguous—that would be like drawing a pen-and-ink sketch, transferring that vastness onto a white surface to be broken up by clean black lines. But words and images must be flexible and contain multitudes, they must flicker, and they must have multiple meanings." (p. 593)

Drużbacka's ambiguities, however, are for play and delight, not to dragoon the reader into some Joycean lifetime of academic study. After all, Drużbacka is a portrait of a woman writer in a time when women were formally excluded from the institutions of intellectual life. Her story is a wonderful portrait of how so many women wove an intellectual life around the gaps and margins of those exclusions.

We hear also a phrase from Tokarczuk's epigram, or long subtitle, to *The Books of Jacob* in this *ars poetica*.

> I do not put down my verses out of a hunger for profit, but rather that my readers might reflect and obtain some slight enjoyment. (p. 592)

Elżbieta Drużbacka was a real historical poet. She was listed in a 1933 list of 400 outstanding women, which noted her "outstanding place among the Polish writers of the eighteenth century" and the influence of the great Polish poet, Waclaw Potocki.

If you google her, you will largely get Polish sources. But with the help of Google Translate we can learn that:

> Elżbieta Drużbacka was a Baroque poet. Initially, her works circulated among readers in the form of copies. In 1752, the Załuski brothers, creators of the Załuski Library, published a volume called *A Collection of Spiritual, Panegyric, Moral and Worldly Rhymes...*, which included the poet's three, currently best-known works, the novel *The Story of Prince Adolf* and several other minor works. These were the only editions of Drużbacka's works during her lifetime.

Moreover, from the same source you can read an automatic translation of her poems.

By some she is known as the Polish Sappho. Tokarczuk's celebration of her in *The Books of Jacob* was well-received. You might wonder: what is her connection with Jacob? There is a hint in her history after death. Her manuscripts were kept in the Krasiński Library and were destroyed during the Warsaw Uprising. Yes, another burning archive.

Context - the Seven Years War

The historical and cultural context of *The Books of Jacob* is rich and yet strange to many readers. Discovering the history of the 'Other Europe'—Poland, Eastern Europe, Judaism, the Ottoman Empire—is one joy of reading this novel. Going deep into Tokarczuk's cultural perspective is one of its rewards. Each week I share a little of what I have learned by looking up names, ideas, references, and places on the internet as I read, and share snippets of quality history and literature as I reread.

Over the last 14 weeks I have shared vignettes on: the Tender Narrator, Rohatyn and the history of multicultural Eastern Europe, Polish society and nobility, the *Szlachta,* Jews in 18th century Poland, the Catholic Church in 18th century Poland, founder of Hasidic Judaism, Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, BeSh'T, the Frankist Movement, Sabbatai Tzvi and Sabbateanism, the Tree of Life and Jewish Messianism, Ottoman and Muslim Europe, European enchantment with classical antiquity in Polish culture, the Bogomils, the Shekhinah, and the real sex scandal in 1756 at Lanckoroń which Tokarczuk weaves into her story.

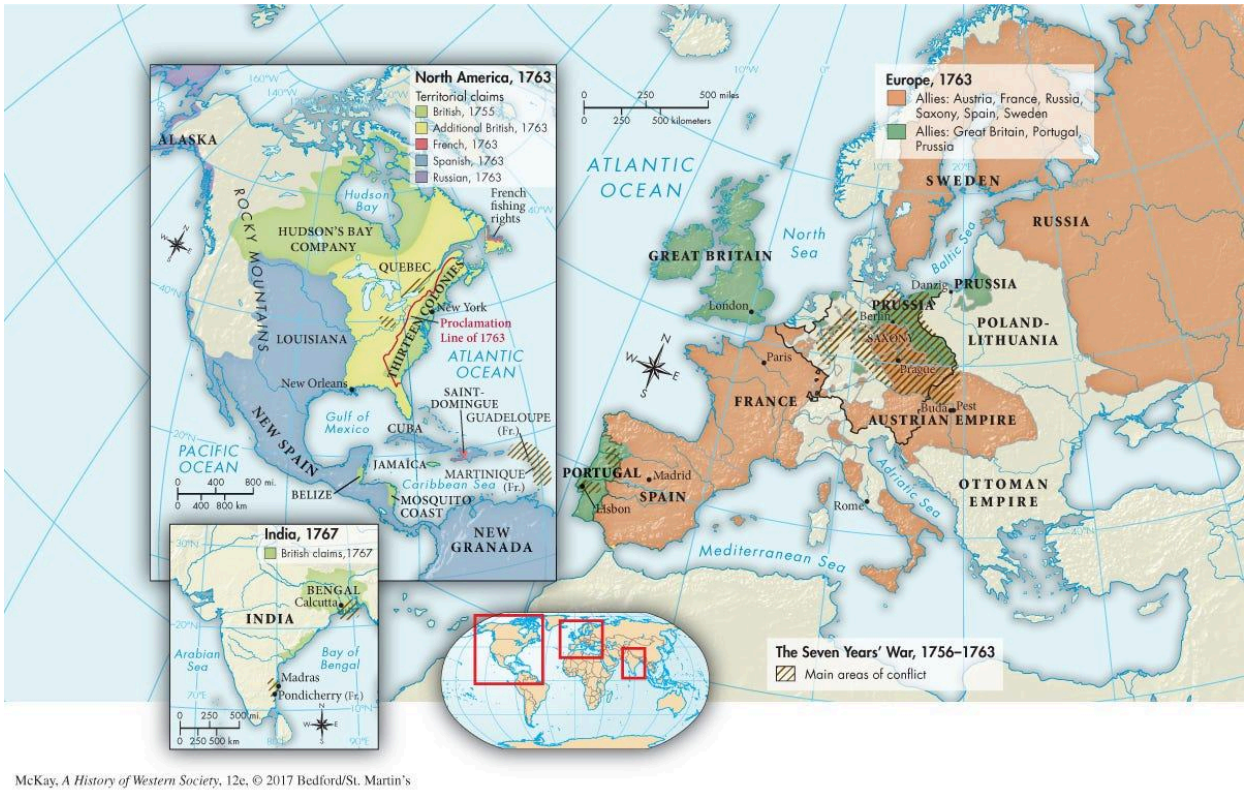
This week I explain why the beginning of the Seven Years War, noted on page 625 of the novel, was a global event that will reverberate through the rest of Tokarczuk's narrative.

> Evidently the world has become unbearable not only on the vast, open plains of Podolia, … It needed some sort of ending, some resolution. Besides, war broke out last year. Yente, who sees everything, knows that this war will last for seven years and will tip the scales that measure human life. The shift is not yet noticeable, but the angels

> have begun their cleaning: they take the rug of the world in both hands and shake it out, letting the dust fly. Soon they'll roll it up again. (pp. 626-625)

How did this Seven Years War "tip the scales that measure human life"?

The Seven Years War (1756-1763) was a conflict between the major powers of Europe, with Austria, France, Russia, Saxony, Sweden, and later Spain siding against Great Britain, Hanover, Prussia, and later Portugal. It spread globally, with coincident conflicts between these powers in South Asia and North America. In the USA it is known as the "French and Indian War." On that continent, this war largely settled the boundaries and cultural identity of Canada; but do not bother informing Donald Trump.



McKay, *A History of Western Society*, 12e, © 2017 Bedford/St. Martin's

Seven Years War, main areas of conflict. Note the map of the Americas.

The *History Extra* magazine has a simple guide to the Seven Years War, written a little provincially from a British perspective. *(A better German account is here)* The deeper consequence of the Seven Years' War, however, was how it recast the geopolitical map of continental, Central and Eastern Europe, especially the diplomacy of Prussia, Austria, and Russia, the three powers that would from the 1770s partition Poland.

The war had its origins in the capture in the 1840s of Silesia by Prussia, under Frederick the Great. Coincidentally (if you believe in coincidences, as Tokarczuk says), Silesia is where Tokarczuk grew up, lives and is setting her next novel. Prussia's victories in the Silesian Wars began the Iron Kingdom's climb to the summit of European power. But Austria, led by Empress Maria Theresa wanted the rich province back. So, the war began and, perhaps not unlike the Donbass today, reordered the world of diplomacy. By 1763 Prussia succeeded in retaining Silesia and elevated it to the status of a great power, permanently altering the balance within the Holy Roman Empire and Central Europe. Austria failed to reclaim Silesia but remained a major power. It sought new domains to compensate for the war's blows to its status and finances. Russia played a decisive role, and made peace with Prussia, while securing its south-western border with the Ottoman Empire, in part through settling Novorossiya. Its influence in Eastern Europe grew, especially under the leadership of the exceptional monarch of the Russian Enlightenment, Catherine II, Catherine the Great. But Poland-Lithuania became the target for interventions, meddling and rival claims by the three great

powers of Europe. The road to the First Partition of Poland in 1772 was laid.

In summary, the Seven Years' War established Prussia as a European great power, weakened Austria, expanded Russian influence, and directly led to the political dismemberment of Poland, reshaping the map and power dynamics of Central and Eastern Europe. It also had cultural effects, including on the development of the Enlightenment and the role of minority communities in European great states.

We will watch these events unfold in the novel and see glimpses of these rulers, Frederick the Great, Catherine the Great, and most of all the dealings of the Austrian Empress Maria Theresa with the heretic and convert, Jacob Frank.

Thanks for reading

🙏🌎❤️📖

Jeff

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Sandra

From Tin to Timeline: Exploring…May 26

The book burnings in these chapters really struck me as a powerful symbol of a society in crisis. It begins with the destruction of the Talmud, but quickly escalates—intolerance

breeds more intolerance until people are burning all kinds of books, often without knowing why (p.621–623). It shows how dangerous it is when a society tries to control ideas instead of engaging with them. The Talmud, for example, is described both as “mendacious and pernicious” (p.624) and as a book that asks hard questions (p.625), showing how texts can be both feared and revered. I was also struck by the contrast with Nahman, who knows many religious books by heart but has no knowledge of geography, astronomy, or philosophy outside his tradition (p.503)—a sign of how book burning and censorship keep people insular.

Chapter 19-21

Slow Read: Books of Jacob, chapters 19-21

The Book of the Comet: "what would happen if hate could transform into a plague?"

Welcome to the Slow Read Along of Olga Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob*. You read along at your pace, and I guide you through the story, characters, and rich historical and cultural context.

This week, *IV The Book of the Comet, Chapters 19 to 21*. We meet Asher Rubin, the kindly, enlightened Jewish doctor. We watch hate transform into a plague after Jacob Frank converts to Christianity and smears his fellow Jews with the blood libel.

***The Books of Jacob* was book 52 in my unordered list of *100 Books to Read Before it is Too Late*. I hope you come to love this book as I do.**

Olga Tokarczuk won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2018.

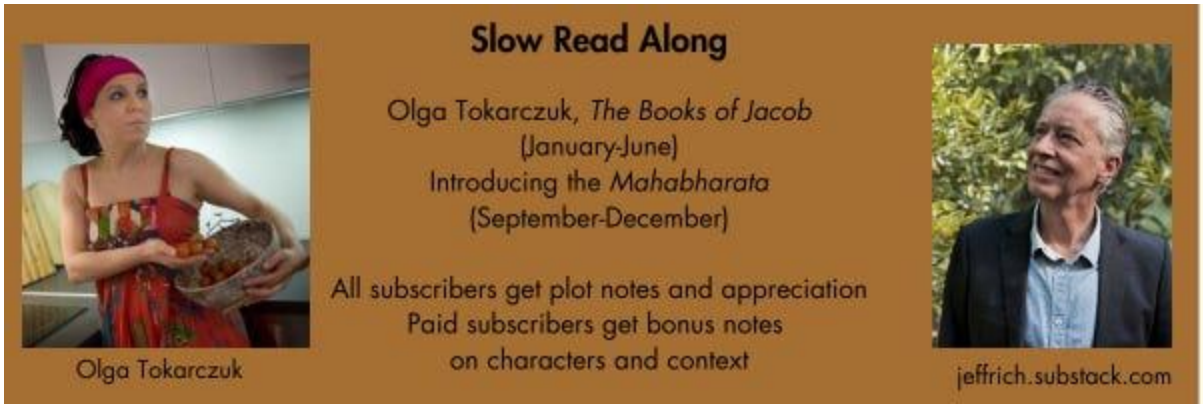
Critics described The Books of Jacob as a "decade-defining book."

Special Note for New Readers and Subscribers

You can check back and catch up on the whole Slow Read of *The Books of Jacob*, with hyper-linked lists of all posts, profiled characters, and guides on my Slow Read page.

If you are checking in on the Slow Read of *The Books of Jacob* for the first time, check these guides to this brilliant novel, the best historical fiction of the twenty-first century, in my humble opinion.

- **13 January - Tips on how to do the 'slow read' of *The Books of Jacob***
- **20 January - An overview of the characters of *The Books of Jacob***
- **27 January - Historical context of the 'Other Europe' in *The Books of Jacob***



The Story: Book of the Comet, Chapters 19 to 21

These three chapters begin with the appearance of Halley's Comet on March 13, 1759 "upending the order of the sky." To some the star portends cosmic change, but Yente is more interested in the "countless humble human things that make up the warp of the world." Those humans will endure crisis, conversion, and catastrophe over the next three chapters. The Utopian community of Frankists in Ivanie will move to Poland, convert to Christianity, calumny their former co-religionists, and flee from a catastrophe of plague, illusions, and hatred.

In Chapter 19 there are fourteen sections that focus on the life of the Frankist community in Ivanie while its leaders and representatives negotiate with the Polish nobility and the Catholic church. They seek an agreement that can secure an independent communal life in exchange for a high-profile conversion to the Polish Catholic faith. Will the price be too high? And will the converts, even after they adopt Christian Polish names, truly let go of their heretical beliefs and scandalous practices?

The appearance of the comet lends weight to Jacob's preaching in Ivanie about the arrival of the Messiah in the form of the Everlasting Virgin or Shekhinah. Nahman talks with his old teacher, Yankiel of Glinno, about how Poland's Jews are responding to Jacob's sect. Kossakowska and Moliwda correspond about negotiations with the Church for a mass baptism. In the village, Nahman observes the multi-partner sex among the believers and how they are seeking to break old laws so new laws can appear. Laws are broken in sensuous ceremonies and identities are remade in the adoption of Polish Christian names.

Pinkas listens to the Rabbi's preparations for the disputation with Jacob's Sabbatians and searches for his daughter, Gitla. Believing that she may be in Ivanie, he travels to the town. There, he is told that she has not been seen for more than a year. Moliwda writes to Katarzyna Kossakowska to say that the Contra-Talmudists are already coming into Lwów *en masse* with unreasonable hopes. He warns Jacob not to test the Christian rulers.

"He tells them that all over Podolia this celestial body has generated great anxiety, and many people have insisted that it augurs a great plague and pogroms, as in Khmelnytsky's day. And famine, too, and an impending war with Frederick Augustus. Everyone agrees the Last Days are coming."

(Books of Jacob, p. 485)

In Chapter 20 there are sixteen sections that take us through the disputation in Lwów Cathedral, in which the Frankists accuse the

Jews of ritual sacrifice of Christian children. Moliwda speaks on behalf of the Contra-Talmudists. The Talmudists present their case meticulously but confront the growing hatred of the crowd. The Church make accusations of the practice of blood sacrifice. In the audience, Pinkas is so astonished by the absurdity of the claims that he confronts Moshe. He is dragged away by the guards. It creates an uproar that suspends the case for three days. When the disputation resumes, chief Rabbi of Lwów, Rapaport condemns the spiteful blood libel and explains how it is justified by deliberate mistranslations of Hebrew. The court rules in favour of the Contra-Talmudists, but does not support their claim that Jews consume Christian blood.

They convert and believe for a time that a Utopia will come - "Everything is going to be different." There is a refugee crisis. Amid these dramatic consequential events, the sad search of Pinkas for his daughter Gitla continues. He learns that she lives with Asher and is caring for the refugees of Poland. We discover a whole family of Frankist Christian converts, the Mayorkowiczes. For a while they are inspired. But the mood shifts quickly. Chmielowski is seen presenting

his *New Athens* in Lwów. After the baptism Jacob changes his appearance. His wife Hana is shocked.

"He thinks of Pinkas, his sort-of father-in-law, and he wonders what would happen if hate could transform into a plague. Is that how herem works? Asher often sees how a cursed person quickly becomes defenseless, weak, ill, and when the curse is taken off him, he gets well."

(Books of Jacob, p. 409)

In Chapter 21 there are only six sections. They deal with the catastrophe that followed the conversion. A plague or cholera comes to Lwów, and the brief enchantment with the Frankists ends. They are blamed for the disease and attacked. Asher and Gitla flee for Vienna, but not before seeing Jacob's delusional faith-healing fail. Jacob himself flees and is protected by Moliwda in Warsaw. But with his "inexplicable self-confidence" still intact, he is irritated by those who

begin to doubt his messianic leadership. In front of his followers he is defiantly arrogant. He accuses them Do "you forget who I am"? But with the Polish nobility he fawns. At Radziwill's estate the one surviving Mayorkowicz is married to a much older Frankist. Nahman observes:

> **No one is immune from acting differently with someone positioned higher than himself than with someone situated lower. The whole world depends on this dynamic, and this hierarchy is deeply ingrained in men."**
>
> (***Books of Jacob*, p. 394**)

But the attacks on the Frankists continue. The disease takes its toll. Reb Mordke dies, the first major follower of Jacob to be lost. Nahman's friend, mentor and fellow student with the Besht is lost. Nahman's seeds of doubt about Jacob are planted deep inside his manuscript, *Scraps*, but still he observes there is "something wonderful about being a stranger."

Question for Readers

The *Books of Jacob* reflects often on the false hopes, utopian beliefs and dreams of escaping history through revolution or revelation. When all the pilgrims arrive in Lwów, their faith in a new beginning cloaks their difficult, vulnerable circumstances.

> **Dusty and tired, they exchange news and offer one another simple food. They don't need anything other than water and a piece of bread to tide them over until the great event. When you think like that, a person doesn't want much in order to live. He doesn't even have to eat every day. What does he need combs, ribbons, clay pots, sharp knives for, when the world is about to be totally transformed? Everything is going to be different, although no one can say how. That's what they are all talking about.**
>
> ***Books of Jacob*, p. 435**

QUESTION FOR READERS:

How have you observed people get carried away by a belief that "everything is going to be different" (this time) because of a charismatic leader or an emotionally resonant idea?

Leave a comment

Below the paywall I have some additional notes for paid subscribers on:

- **Character - Asher Rubin**
- **Context - the Frankists' 1759 conversion, blood libel and Hasidism.**

Thanks for being a paid subscriber.

Character - Asher Rubin

There are 120 or more characters in The Books of Jacob. Most are drawn from real history. Many of their names change through the novel. My guide helps you keep track of these dazzling character portraits. You can check back over the characters I have profiled over the last weeks at my Slow Read page.

This week I profile Asher Rubin.

Asher Rubin is a Jewish doctor who studied in Italy and lives, at the start of the novel, in Rohatyn. He is skeptical of Jacob's movement and represents the early adoption of scientific approaches to medicine and thought in Europe. Later in the book, after his relocation to Vienna, he will change his name to Rudolph Ascherbach.

I have not found any reference to Rubin as a historical character, but he may be a minor figure who Tokarczuk has brought to life. However, he is an example of the Jewish Enlightenment or *Haskalah* (connected with the word "השלה", or "enlightenment"). The leading figure of the Jewish Enlightenment was Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), who we may meet later in the novel.

Moses Mendelssohn pictured with leading German Enlightenment literary figure, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (standing)

We have encountered Asher Rubin's gloomy thoughts from the first *Book of Fog*. Amid the fog of Rohatyn and the feuding of rival Jewish factions, Asher wondered:

And what would happen if we were to really open our eyes? If we were to see by some miracle the reality that surrounds us? What might that be like?

(***Books of Jacob*, p. 927**)

Early in the novel he is presented as a sceptic, who refuses to take sides in the war of belief between orthodox and shabbatean Judaism. Worse, he may even be a misanthrope because "People always irritate and disappoint him."

Yet he is a loving and kind doctor, who takes in the deluded Polish princess, Gitla Pinkakowska. His scepticism does not cauterize his compassion. He provides a refuge for Gitla and comes to love her. His practical care for others extends to the poor and refugees who swamp Lwów. His enlightened thinking saves some of those irritating and disappointing people from the plague that descends upon Lwów. He does not believe in the stars or fates or curses. He does not believe in Jacob's faith healing. He burns his clothes after treating patients and

investigates the latest theories about germs and the spread of cholera by water.

He is a contrast to Jacob Frank who insists to his followers that he can heal them from the plague through the laying on of his hands, and faith in his charisma. Frank fails, and the gloss of the messiah is chipped. Asher saves on girl from the Mayorkowicz family. But the plague of cholera and of hate leads Asher to flee Lwów. After Gitla's birth of twins, "Asher and Gitla pack up all of their belongings and their children and set out for Vienna."

There they both will meld the Eastern European and German Enlightenments.

Context - 1759 Conversion, blood libel and Hasidism

The historical and cultural context of The Books of Jacob is rich and yet strange to many readers. Discovering the history of the 'Other Europe' and Tokarczuk's rich multicultural celebration are rewards of our reading. Each

week I share snippets of context from history and literature to deepen your appreciation of the novel.

18th century Polish depiction of 'Death Ritual' or blood libel displayed at Sandomierz Cathedral

Jacob and the Frankists' conversion to Christianity in 1759 is central to the novel, and was decisive in the real history of the Jews in the Other Europe in the 18th century. The event was crucial because

Frank did not only blend the doctrines of three faiths. He gave credibility and force to the blood libel, that the Jewish faith demanded the practice of ritual sacrifice of Christian children. This long-standing meme of hate in European Christian culture had appeared before, and would appear again, when hate transformed into a plague.

Simon Schama's *Belonging: The Story of the Jews 1492-1900* traces the real events from which Tokarczuk weaves her historical fiction. He emphasises that Bishop Dembowksi's death (in chapter 16 of the novel) had deprived the Frankists of their protector and rebalanced power in favour of the Polish Jews. But, he wrote

> **"The reprieve proved to be premature. Another Jew-hating cleric, Bishop Kajetan Sołtyk, issued a document arguing that not only were the accusations of ritual murder committed by the Jews true, but that for the first time *Jew*s, which was to say the anti-Talmudists, had unequivocally confirmed this. Appallingly, the Frankists had done just that."**

Schama *Belonging,* p. 449

The Frankists shifted from being a

> **"third way - a version of Jews who accepted some doctrines they argued were common to the real Judaism and Christianity - and now they stood forth as prospective converts… A second supplication from the Frankists even included, at its end, one of the most malignant of Christian accusations: that the Talmud actually required observant Jews to use Christian blood for its rituals."**

Schama *Belonging,* 449-450

Schama gives his own account of the disputation at Lwów. He describes the dispute as a "civil war" which "could only have one theatrical ending: a mass apostasy of nearly a thousand Frankists at Lwów Cathedral" (*Belonging*, p. 451). Though the conversion won renown and nobility for some of Frank's followers,

> **“for the Jews of Poland-Lithuania the fact that the apostasy had taken place voluntarily was a violent body blow. More shocks lay ahead.”**

One of those shocks was the death in 1760 of Baal Shem Tov, who it was said “expired of heartbreak” because of the apostasy of Frank and his former students like Mordke and Nahman. His teaching of a less legalistic Hasidic Judaism that responded to the passions that inspired the Frankists would be one of the more beneficial shocks. The spread of the Jewish Enlightenment was another. But overall, Jacob Frank’s conversion played with fire. It snatched defeat from the crucible of conversion. He helped to turn hate into a plague. The comet was a sign from the heavens, not of the coming of the Messiah but of the Ruin of Poland.

Schama discusses the emergence of Hasidism, and the many academic disputes of its causes. He refers to Gershom Scholem’s hypothesis that it was a “reaction to the debacle of Shabbetai Zevi, and to the agony of

the Cossack massacres of 1648-49." Schama places the causes later and closer to the clay feet of our Messiah claimant, Jacob Frank.

> **"Hasidism did indeed take root in painful times. As he himself understood it, grappling with those troubles was the whole meaning of the Besht's mysterious election and his several ascents of discovery. During the last third of the eighteenth century a cascade of troubles struck the million Ashkenazim of Poland-Lithuania. It was not Shabbetai Zevi who shook the confidence of the community but Jacob Frank, since the mass apostasy of his thousand converts in 1759 had been voluntary, a spectacle the Polish Church never let the Jews forget."**
>
> (**Schama *Belonging,* pp. 464-5**)

This incident in the Lwow Cathedral, obscure to the uninformed, turns out to be a seminal event in modern history, in Europe and North America.

Thanks for reading

Chapter 22-24

Slow Read: Books of Jacob, chapters 22-24

"by telling the story of the world, we are changing the world"

Welcome to the Slow Read Along of Olga Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob*.

You read along at your pace, and I guide you through the story, characters, and rich historical and cultural context.

This week, *Chapters 22 to 24*, ending *IV. The Book of the Comet* and beginning *V. The Book of Metal and Sulfur.* We meet Jacob Frank's grand inquisitor and anti-Jewish propagandist, Gaudenty Pikulski. Jacob becomes not a celebrated Polish lord. He is interned in the spiritual heart of Poland at Częstochowa.

The Books of Jacob was book 52 in my unordered list of *100 Books to Read Before it is Too Late*. I hope you come to love this book as I do.

Olga Tokarczuk won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2018.

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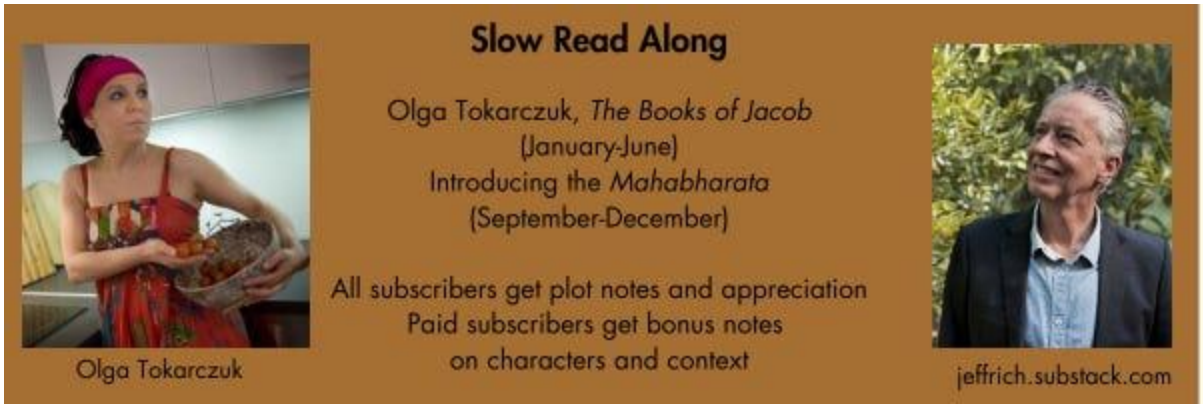

The Story: Chapters 22 to 24

These three chapters conclude the *Book of the Comet* and begin *The Book of Metal and Sulfur*. The unexpected outcome of Jacob Frank's conversion is his imprisonment in one of Polish Catholicism's holiest sites, Częstochowa, the Pauline monastery and fortress erected in 1382 on Jasna Góra or Bright Mount.

In **Chapter 22** there are thirteen sections which concentrate on Jacob's story after his conversion and disgrace. He is accompanied by Moliwda, supported by Kossakowska, and investigated by Father Pikulski. Jacob and Moliwda flee to Warsaw with the aim of securing an audience with the Polish king to grant the Frankists land. Jacob enjoys the sponsorship

of the Polish nobility and spends lavishly. Like many gurus, he indulges grandiosely and slowly loses touch with reality. Moliwda does not inform him of the reality that the Polish authorities are spying on him. Kossakowska attempts to integrate the Frankists as "Puritans," thinking of the American settler dissidents, into Polish society. But Hana maintains her distance from converted life. Pikulski interrogates Shlomo Shorr and other converts and suspects their faith is a superficial disguise. The Bernardines, the religious order to which Pikulski belongs, arrest Jacob and interrogate him. Slowly Jacob loses his confidence. Moliwda witnesses the questioning and is then himself interrogated. He succumbs to pressure and reveals all that he knows about Jacob Frank. Moliwda again betrays the one he loves.

The short Chapter 23 (only three sections) concludes the *Book of the Comet* with three separations from Jacob—Moliwda, Nahman and Hana. Moliwda's testimony against Jacob saved him and secured him the office as asecretary to Primate Łubieński. But his official career is a kind of prison in which Łubieński expects him to provide information on the

heretics. Nahman is summoned to an interrogation. He confides his ambivalence about Jacob, both Messiah and abusive lord, to his *Scraps* and under the pressure of interrogation and self-doubt gives the Bernardine interrogators what they want. Hana is a prisoner in the invented Polish Christian identity that Kossakowska has constructed for her in her noble estate. She resists passively, delaying her baptism.

Chapter 24 begins *The Book of Metal and Sulfur* and has twelve sections. Jacob's downfall accelerates, driven by his character flaws and the cascades of history. Jacob is beaten and sentenced to an internment, as an internal enemy, in the Pauline monastery near Częstochowa. From his cell he watches the pilgrims visiting the monastery, including its Black Madonna. He has servants and slowly charms the prior and guards to provide him abnormal privileges, including writing to his family. After writing a letter to Hana, news spreads that Jacob has survived persecution from the authorities. He was not dead as they feared. Shlomo visits Jacob in his prison, and sends gifts, including Father Chmielowski's *New Athens*. The priest's odd encyclopaedia becomes the

text through which Jacob Frank learns Polish. Coincidentally, Chmielowski's friend Drużbacka visits the monastery in which Jacob is a privileged prisoner. She is devastated by grief because her daughter has died. She prays uncertainly before the Black Madonna shrine. She smelts her jewellery into a golden heart that is draped over the Madonna. There she meets the "imprisoned Jewish prophet," Jacob Frank. She asks him if he is capable of bringing the dead back to life.

There is so much pain on view here, Drużbacka's own pain just a drop in the sea of tears that have been shed in this place. Every human tear enters a stream that flows into a little river, and then the river joins a bigger river, and so on, until in the end, in the great current of an enormous river, it washes into the sea and dissolves on the horizon. In these hearts hung up around the Madonna, Drużbacka sees mothers who have lost, or are losing, or will lose their children and grandchildren. And in some sense, life is this constant loss. Improving one's station, getting richer, is the greatest illusion. In reality, we are richest at the moment of our birth; after that, we begin to lose everything.

Books of Jacob, pp. 296-295

Question for Readers

There is a telling passage about story-telling towards the end of the *Book of the Comet*. It is part of the memoir of Nahman, christened Piotr Jakubowski, "Scraps: Of the three paths of the story and how telling a tale can be its own deed." He describes three paths at a crossroads. The middle path is the simplest, for fools, focussed only on facts. The right path is for the over-confident who trust their experience and their senses. The left path is "for the brave, the desperadoes, even—that one will be full of traps, potholes, hexes, and calamitous occurrences" (p. 334). The left path is the path that Nahman and Tokarczuk and even myself take.

> The path to the left is only for those who have shown they deserve it, those who understand what Reb Mordke always said—that the world itself demands to be narrated, and only then does it truly exist, only

then can it flourish fully. But also that by telling the story of the world, we are changing the world.

Books of Jacob, p. 333

QUESTION FOR READERS:

Do you believe that by telling the story of the world, we are changing the world?

Leave a comment

Below the paywall, I have some additional notes for paid subscribers on:

- **Character - Father Gaudenty Pikulski**, whose interrogation of the Frankists founded a strand of European Anti-Semitism

- **Context - Częstochowa**, the holy site of Polish Christianity whose Black Madonna finally connects the story of Jacob and Elżbieta Drużbacka.

Thanks for being a paid subscriber.

Character - Father Gaudenty Pikulski

There are 120 or more characters in The Books of Jacob. Most are drawn from real history. Many of their names change through the novel. My guide helps you keep track of these dazzling character portraits. You can check back over the characters I have profiled over the last weeks at my Slow Read page.

This week I profile Father Gaudenty Pikulski.

Pikulski is Jacob's interrogator who exposes, in his mind, the insincerity of the Jewish converts. His forced confessions condemn Jacob to internment in Częstochowa. His interrogation is driven by more than a

search for truth. It is driven by a personal disgust at the Frankists' belief in Jacob as Messiah, and a cultural hatred of the Jews of Poland.

> Here Pikulski realizes that they actually *love* this Jacob character, that they are joined with this repulsive convert by some mysterious, unquestionable bond, which in him, a monk and a priest, arouses only disgust."
>
> *Books of Jacob*, p. 360

Pikulski writes to his Primate Łubieński and sets out forensically the nature of the Frankists' belief. But even here his hatred of their false faith and their cultural origin comes out. They are a "band of fraudsters" who:

> ought to be carefully watched, lest their muddy views of Christianity, their effrontery, and their unregenerate ambitions disgrace in any way the Church, Our Holy Mother."

Books of Jacob, p. 356

Pikulski is another real historical figure. He was a priest who wrote a tract "Jewish Spite" that was based on his disgust at Jacob Frank, his followers and Pikulski's deep hatred of the Jews. A former Polish Minister of Culture, Andrzej Zakrzewski wrote a profile of Pikulski's tract and how it emerged from historical circumstances of the Polish Commonwealth of the mid-eighteenth century. You can read the short, informative piece here.

Zakrzewski On Pikulski

241KB · PDF file

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In summary, he writes that:

> The work of Gaudenty Pikulski was aimed at: 1. arouse sympathy of the entire gentry class towards the sectarian actions of Jakub Frank; 2.

discredit Orthodox Jews, who did not approve theological interpretations of the Frankists. These aims were not achieved. Pikulski's text proved to be a compilation of lies and calumnies, which solidified the negative image of Jewish community in Poland. Thus the book became a kind of "encyclopedia of anti-Semitism", reiterating unfounded allegations against Jews, known in Europe from the Middle Ages through the present times.

Context - Częstochowa

The historical and cultural context of The Books of Jacob is rich and yet strange to many readers. Discovering the history of the 'Other Europe' and Tokarczuk's rich multicultural celebration are rewards of our reading. Each week I share snippets of context from history and literature to deepen your appreciation of the novel.

Pikulski sends Jacob to be interned not in a simple prison cell, but in the spiritual heart of Christian Poland, Częstochowa. It is not immediately

evident in Tokarczuk's text that this is so. Częstochowa is described as a little town with an empty market where a group of pilgrims sing a "ragged snippet of a song" (p. 321).

But if, like me, you do not follow Christian religion and out of curiosity look up the name of this little town on the internet, you discover Częstochowa is one of the largest pilgrimage destinations in the Christian world. The city's official website states that 4.5 million people from over 80 countries visit each year as tourists and pilgrims to worship at the Ikon of the Black Madonna, which consoled Elżbieta Drużbacka in her grief, and which Jacob Frank believed was the Shekhinah. Indeed, at the city website, you can even look through a live web camera on the monastery that houses the icon and at the market square where Jacob and his followers traded prison gifts.

The Pauline monastery in Częstochowa was first built in 1382 on Jasna Góra (Bright Mountain). It is an old fortress that was a base of resistance to the Swedish invasion of Poland in 1655, and will figure later in *The Books of Jacob* as Polish, Russian, Austrian and Prussian soldiers fight

over the Partition of Poland. In 1978, the Polish Pope John Paul II celebrated a mass here with more than 1.5 million people when he returned to his atheistic, Communist homeland. Despite its status as a Catholic pilgrimage site, Częstochowa had a significant Jewish presence from the 1600s until World War Two. Some of the history of the Jewish community there is told in the short document by Andrzej Zakrzewski.

The most famous national icon of Częstochowa is the Black Madonna. Jacob Frank twists this most sacred relic of the spiritual heart of Poland into his own heretical, messianic set of beliefs. In the section, "The holy picture that conceals without revealing," Tokarczuk describes Jacob's encounter with the icon.

> Jacob looks up and sees that the ornate cover over the picture has been lifted so that it is now almost completely exposed, and he expects that a light will shine from within it—a blinding light that cannot be borne by the human eye—but all he sees are two dark shapes against a silver backdrop. It takes him a while to realise those shapes are faces, a

woman and a child, dark impenetrable, as if they were leaning out of the deepest darkness."

Books of Jacob, p. 311

What is the belief that the Messiah claimant extracts from this obscure image?

> “That’s obvious. It’s obvious once you sweep away all the dust off all those stories and parables, all that chicanery, it’s clear as day. Have you seen the picture they have here. The dark shining face of the Jasna Góra Virgin is the Shekhinah.”
>
> *Books of Jacob*, p. 310

On the Shekhinah, you may want to check back on my post *Slow Read Along of The Books of Jacob | II. Book of Sand, Chapter 12 "There is one God in three figures, and the fourth is the holy Mother"* which had some notes on the cultural and historical context of the Shekhinah.

Thanks for reading

🙏❤️🌏

Jeff

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Clare

Jun 2

I checked out the website cameras , which give fantastic views of the town. It's well worth following up Jeff's like. The depth of his research is continuing to thrill me in the deep reading of The Books of Jacob. I think that in spite of this being my second read, this book

is so rich that I may go on rereading it several times in the future, alongside books like War and Peace, Jane Austen's novels, and Middlemarch. In other words it has become part of my personal canon.

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Sandra

From Tin to Timeline: Exploring...Jun 7

Do you believe that by telling the story of the world, we are changing the world?

This is a complicated question, and its component parts are worth unpacking:

• To “tell the story” is an act of selection, interpretation, and framing. Nahman demonstrates this clearly: we, as individuals, choose what to notice, what to remember, and how to relate or tell it. “Nahman divides things into what can be written and what cannot” p.684

• "The world" is a fluid concept—it can mean:

◦ The material world (societies, ecosystems, economies), represented in the novel by "The Athens" encyclopedia or the markets in each town.

◦ The social world (relationships, identities, power structures), portrayed through the class structures of the time: for example, Lord Jabłonowski (p. 866), the gentry (p. 865), and the

“complaints about the hierarchies of gentry and the hostility of the peasants” (p. 863). Social stratification is further explored within both Jewish and non-Jewish communities: “It was better to be a Jew than a peasant” (p. 864), and “Scratch it with your fingernail, and you will see what’s underneath” (p. 850)—a commentary on the true nature of class distinctions.

◦ The imagined world (myths, beliefs, ideologies), how we frame what we cannot see or understand to bring comfort in our unknowing. The Books of Jacob is filled with competing religious visions and interpretations.

Each of these domains is shaped by how people understand them, and that understanding is mediated through narratives and storytelling. We do not live in raw experience alone, but in interpreted experience. As we’re reminded early in the book: “Nahman is making it up. In reality, he fainted…” (p. 830).

Does the way we configure these elements change the world?

Yes—and this is why controlling the narrative is so powerful.

In the current chapter, this idea is illustrated by the Jesuit priests: “One of the priests solemnly warned us not to listen to any further ‘fairy tales’ from Jacob Frank nor to believe his stories about the prophet Elijah or other matters” (p. 330).

Perhaps this is also why Tokarczuk presents so many different points of view: from Yente, Nahman, Chmielowski, and others, but never directly from Jacob Frank himself. This absence may reflect her commentary on the complexity of storytelling, and the risks of misunderstanding how narratives are crafted and by whom.

Book 5- Book of Metal and Sulfur

Chapter 25-27

Slow Read: Books of Jacob, chapters 25-27

"The new king will be the last king of Poland. Three seas will flood the nation."
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You read along at your pace, and I guide you through the story, characters, and rich historical and cultural context.

This week, *Chapters 25 to 27* of *V. The Book of Metal and Sulfur* and ***VI The Book of the Distant Country.*** We meet Moshe Dobrushka and witness the first Partition of Poland that takes Jacob to the court of Austrian Empress Maria Theresa, and takes Jacob's daughter Eva into the arms of Maria Theresa's naive enlightened son, Emperor Joseph II.

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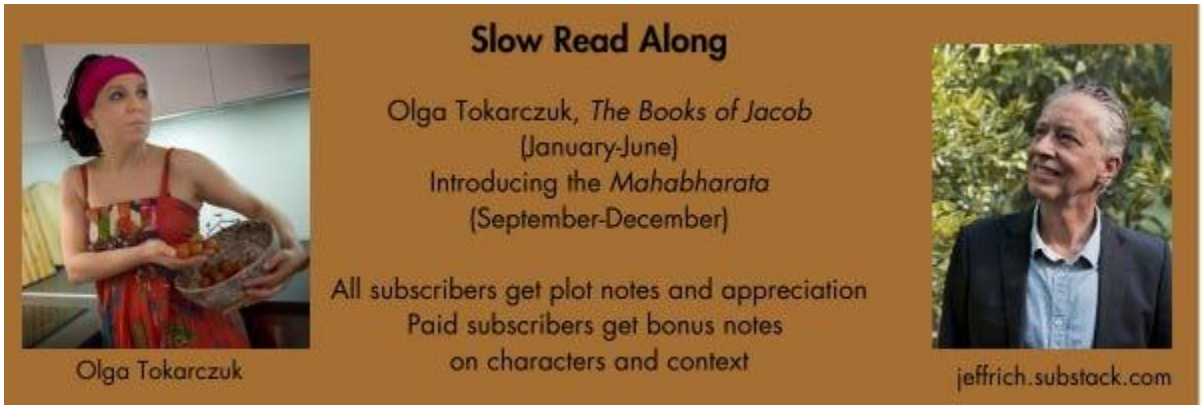

We are getting close to the end. There are two more posts to end the novel, and then I will do a wrap-up reflecting on the fantastic journey through history that we have taken.

The Story: Chapters 25 to 27

These three chapters bear witness to the first Partition of Poland, and Jacob's exile as a baron and fading guru in a Moravian castle, waiting on Empress Maria Theresa of Austria.

In **Chapter 25** there are nineteen sections which take us to the end of the *Book of Metal and Sulfur*. It begins with Yente in the cave, cared for by her great-granddaughter Pesel. Yente sees Nahman pleading for Jacob's forgiveness, and Jacob fuming impotently in his prison cell. Kossakowska sours in grief following the death of her husband. She enables persecution of the local Jews. Hayah Shorr makes a prophecy:

> "The new king will be the last king of Poland. Three seas will flood the nation. Warsaw will be left an island… Jacob will be freed by his

> greatest enemies, and with his closest allies, he will make an escape to the south." (p. 275)

She foretells the Partition of Poland and the Frankists' flight to Germany. When the King dies, a succession crisis ensues that draws in the major European powers (Russia, Austria and Prussia). We see the crisis through the eyes of Kossakowska who plays politics in the election of the King by the *szlachta*. Jacob seeks patronage from the Russian monarch, Catherine II the Great, who has more influence than Kossakowska over Polish politics.

The crisis releases Hana from Kossakowska's caressing captivity. She goes to live with Jacob, who maintains a harem of his followers. Her father Tovah confronts Jacob, and breaks with him angrily urging his daughter, who has adopted a Christian name of Hanele, to leave. She does not, and Jacob's degeneration leads to him urging his male followers to have sex with Hana in order to bind them to Jacob. In 1770 Hana dies from grief after the death of two infants. Her death parallels

the dying grief of Drużbacka, who writes a final letter to Chmielowksi that is never received since the priest we met at Rohatyn also dies.

Amid the political disintegration of Poland, Częstochowa is overrun by Polish aristocratic rebels, led by Prince Lubomirski, who develops a sexual fascination with Jacob and Hana's daughter, Avacha or Eva. Polish soldiers rape Eva. Soon after the fortress of Częstochowa is overrun by Russians. General Bibikov leads the Russian forces that seize the holy site of Polish nationhood. He kindly and politely releases Jacob Frank.

Nahman recalls the end of the years of metal and sulfur.

> Jacob, our Lord, says:
>
> *"Everyone who seeks salvation must do three things: change his place of residence, change his name, and change his deeds."*
>
> And so we did. We became other people, and we left Częstochowa, at once the lightest and the darkest place. (p. 229)

Chapter 26 begins ***Book VI, The Book of the Distant Country***. There are thirteen sections in which the next generation of Frankists, including Eva come to the fore. The Frankists leave Poland and move to the town of Brunn (Brno) in Moravia. Eva is groomed as an aristocrat. She is attracted to Solomon Dobrushka's son, Moshe. Moshe is entranced by the philosophy of the enlightenment, becomes a Mason, and changes his name to Thomas von Schönfeld. Despite Thomas and Eva's attraction, Jacob marries his daughter off for money and a German aristocratic title. He introduces Eva to the Austrian court. Eva and Emperor Joseph II become lovers. Empress Maria Theresa studies Jacob to understand how she can convert the Jews and govern her multinational empire.

In **Chapter 27** there are eleven sections which focus on the story of Jacob, Eva and Thomas at the Austrian court. Jacob imagines he can play Empress Maria Theresa. She deploys him to persuade the Ottoman court to strengthen Austrian power in South-Eastern Europe. Jacob sends Nahman, but his mission fails. In Warsaw, a former follower, Golinski, writes to the Austrian court pointing out Jacob's many frauds. In Brunn, Jacob's court becomes more degenerate, cult-like and incestuous.

Moshe/Thomas′ enlightenment get-rich-quick schemes fail and his rivalry with Jacob deepens. There is not enough money to pay for the splendour. When Empress Maria Theresa dies, Jacob′s political position weakens. His final fall approaches.

Question for Readers

> A certain de Kempelen created for his amusement a machine depicting a Turk in an elegant Eastern costume, with a dark face, shiny and polished and quite friendly-looking. The machine sits at the table and plays chess, so well that so far no one has beaten it ….
>
> [Emperor Joseph II:] "If a machine is capable of doing what man can do, and even doing it better than man, then what is man? (p. 179)

Readers of the *Burning Archive* may recall that early in 2025 I wrote about Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, and indeed offered my paid subscribers an audiobook mini of this classic essay - *Walter Benjamin on the Angel of History; and his surprising connection to the Burning*

Archive. There is a surprising connection to *The Books of Jacob* and de Kempelen's machine in the first part of this essay.

> "The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings."
>
> Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History, # I*

Benjamin compared the device to the way dogmatic ideas, like historical materialism, are deployed like magical machines to win every argument. With hindsight he was not deceived. The enlightenment monarch Emperor Joseph II was deceived. We frail humans often will ourselves to be deceived by such a system of mirrors.

QUESTION FOR READERS:

Are our machines (e.g. AI) really capable of doing what we can do? Why do we make messiahs of our machines?

Leave a comment

Below the paywall, I have some additional notes for paid subscribers on:

- **Character** - Moshe Dobrushka/ Thomas von Schonfeld
- **Context** - The Partition of Poland and the Last King of Poland.

Subscribed

Thanks for being a paid subscriber.

Character - Moshe Dobrushka/ Thomas von Schönfeld

There are 120 or more characters in The Books of Jacob. Most are drawn from real history. Many of their names change through the novel. My guide helps you keep track of these dazzling character portraits. You can check back over the characters I have profiled over the last weeks at my Slow Read page.

This week I profile Moshe Dobrushka who becomes Thomas von Schönfeld and then Junius Frey.

Moshe Dobrushka is another surprising connection between Olga Tokarczuk, Walter Benjamin and the grand scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem. Scholem was a friend of Benjamin, as I discussed with Samantha Rose Hill (*Hannah Arendt's Vision of Freedom | Walter Benjamin's Poetry of History*). He carries forward Sabbateanism and Frankism into the revolutionary thought of the European Enlightenment. For that reason, Scholem wrote a study specifically of this utopian chameleon, Moshe Dobrushka.

Moses Dobruška or Moses Dobruschka (1753-1794) was a writer, poet and revolutionary. His mother was the first cousin of Jacob Frank. In 1775 he converted from Judaism to the Catholic faith and took the name of Franz Thomas Schönfeld. In 1778 he was elevated to nobility in Vienna, becoming Franz Thomas Edler von Schönfeld. Together with Ephraim Joseph Hirschfeld, who we also meet in the novel, he founded the masonic lodge of the "Knights of St. John the Evangelists for Asia in

Europe," active in Germany and Austria between 1783 and 1790, which was the first German-speaking masonic order to accept Jews.

In 1792, in the wake of the French Revolution, he travelled via Strasbourg to Paris and became a Jacobin, changing his name, once again, to Junius Frey. The new name derived from Junius from the Roman Junii family that fostered the famous tyrant slayer Brutus, and Frey being a transliteration of the German word for "liberty". In June 1793 he published his book *Philosophie sociale, dédiée au peuple françois*. He was arrested for treason and espionage and executed by guillotine on 5 April 1794.

There is a French study of his life and political thought here. You can read more about his family here.

Context - The Partition of Poland

The historical and cultural context of The Books of Jacob is rich and yet strange to many readers. Discovering the history of the 'Other Europe' and Tokarczuk's rich multicultural celebration are rewards of our reading. Each week I share

snippets of context from history and literature to deepen your appreciation of the novel.

Jacob is freed from Częstochowa not by his beliefs, his faith, his followers, or the Polish nobility. He is freed by a kindly Russian general during the Partition of Poland. The false Messiah of Polish history is freed from the holy fortress of Polish nationalism amidst the twenty-five years national trauma that liquidated the Polish state.

These events are central to the historical martyrdom of Polish nationalist historiography. It is partly why Tokarczuk is disliked by contemporary Polish nationalists who like to present Poland as an innocent victim.

The Partitioning of Poland refers to a series of three partitions that occurred during the late 18th century, leading to the disintegration of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Territorial vulnerabilities and internal instability led to the three neighbouring powers (Russia, Prussia, and Austria) dividing the state.

The first partition in 1772 resulted in Poland losing about one-third of its territory and half its population. Subsequent partitions

followed—1793 and 1795—each prompted by internal reforms and uprisings, notably led by figures like Tadeusz Kościuszko. Ultimately, the third partition in 1795 erased Poland from the map of Europe until 1918. There is an excellent short introduction to the history of the Partitioning of Poland here.

Oddly, the decades of the Partitioning also led to a cultural and political flowering under the Last King of Poland. We will meet this king Stanisław August Poniatowski in the last chapters of the *Books of Jacob*. One popular, accessible account of this period through the character of the king is Adam Zamoyski's *The Last King of Poland*.

Last King of Poland Stanisław August in coronation robes, 1764

Poniatowski rose to the throne with the support of Catherine the Great of Russia. He became a reform-minded monarch who sought to modernize and strengthen his diminished state. He championed education, the arts, and constitutional reform, notably presiding over the drafting of the Polish Constitution of 3 May 1791.

Zamoyski's narrative is both a sympathetic portrait of a flawed but principled leader and a broader analysis of the forces that led to Poland's

downfall—highlighting the interplay between internal weaknesses and external aggression.

There is a short summary of Zamoyski's defence of the King from the Polish Culture Website here.

Thanks for reading